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Editorial

Saying what you think

»You can't say anything anymore these days« – a sentiment sometimes stated by journalists as well. Hence, what is the current state of press freedom? »Anyone who criticizes Israel is quickly labeled an anti-Semite in Germany,« one interviewee tells Mandy Tröger. Her article »On the impact of anti-Semitism resolutions on journalism in Germany« deals with the practical implications of the debate on criticizing Israel and anti-Semitism, which are reflected in various resolutions. Spoiler alert: All the experts interviewed for the article consider the infringements of fundamental rights based on the resolutions to be highly problematic.

The focus of the current issue, »The Freedom of the Press and Right-wing Extremism,« is introduced by a find from the *New York Weekly Journal* of 1733. Its publisher, John Peter Zenger, prefaced the text with a Latin quotation: *Mira temporum felicitas ubi sentiri quae velis, et quae sentias dicere licet*, roughly translated as »What wonderful fortune these times are, when one can think what one will and say what one thinks.« Strictly speaking, Tacitus wrote in *Histories*, Book I, 1: *Rara temporum felicitate, ubi sentire quae velis, et quae sentias dicere licet*, which amounts to roughly the same thing, with the difference, however, that Tacitus speaks of a »rare happiness.«

Zenger was fortunate in 18th-century English colonies in North America – the publisher and journalist was thrown into prison and charged because his weekly newspaper had sharply criticized the governor of New York, William Cosby. Miraculously, Zenger was acquitted – a victory for the freedom of the press, which at that time had not been constitutionally guaranteed. Gunter Reus unearthed this gem, a fitting introduction to the focus of this issue.

Our focus begins with an interview study by Olivia Mangold: »Attacks from the right. Effects of right-wing extremist threats on journalistic practice in Germany.« Four journalists from West Germany who regularly report on right-wing extremism talk about violence, threats, and intimidation attempts in the guided interviews.

»It really affects how you move, how you travel by train, how often you look over your shoulder on your way home,« Michael Krell, Klemens Köhler, and Tom Böhme quote one of the journalists interviewed in their article. Using qualitative interviews, they examine »how covering the far right in East Germany affects media professionals, both in their professional practices and the challenges and consequences that entails.« Their situation is so severe that some of the journalists only leave their homes for the most essential purposes. They are bombarded with death threats online, which is why they have largely gone silent on the internet. This is a far cry from the happiness Tacitus evoked almost two thousand years ago: being able to say and write what they have discovered. Rather, it seems that it is often precisely those who claim that they are no longer allowed to speak out who are most eager to silence voices of enlightenment.

So far, this issue has focused on the question of how right-wing extremism affects journalism. Vice versa, it is necessary to address the equally important question of how journalism deals or should deal with right-wing extremism. How can and should journalists report on the right-wing party AfD? Horst Pöttker addresses this issue in his article »Freedom of the press and right-wing extremism – a dilemma? Theses on how journalism should deal with the AfD.« He advises »avoiding the counterproductive effects of journalistic outrage about the AfD« and calls for a »strategy of dealing with right-wing extremism in a manner that is as fearless as it is factual and sober.« Horst Pöttker is aware of the difficulties involved in the AfD's strategy of legalism, for example. His demand is based on the conviction that there is still much that can be said, because he wants journalism to »explain the concrete consequences for society and each of its members of placing power in the hands of a party like the AfD through individual voting decisions.«

Iulia Bârză and Veronica Câmpian take a look at Romania in their article »Media freedom in the shadow of right-wing extremism. Challenges for journalists from Romania.« They conclude that »while the extreme right has created a climate of intimidation, this has also fostered collective resistance within the journalistic community.« However, they point out possible solutions: It is necessary to »create solid mechanisms to protect against manipulation and disinformation.«

The media in the US currently faces the problem »that government information, especially from supposedly impartial sources, is being distorted to serve the government's goals,« according to Jelani Cobb, Dean of the Columbia Journalism School, in an interview with Stine Eckert. This makes clear how much the »wonderful fortune of these times, when you can think what you want and say what you think« can be considered a positive utopia in the US at the moment.

»You are a gangster and a prostitute, a banker and a boxer, a heretic and a mystic all rolled into one,« is how Georg Stefan Troller, who passed away in

September at the age of 103, described his interview technique. Siegfried Weischenberg dedicated a portrait to the great journalist, who explored the freedom of the press and suffered repeatedly from its restrictions. We are publishing an abridged version of this portrait in advance.

The joy of being able to write what you think can be found in the books journalists have written. Boris Romahn (Salzburg) and Martina Thiele (Tübingen) have seized the opportunity to breathe new life into the »Book Journalism« section. »Book Journalism«, founded by Wolfgang R. Langenbucher and Hannes Haas, and continued by Fritz Hausjell, thus remains an Austrian-German co-production. What is new is that the »Top Ten« are no longer ranked, but simply ten new books by journalists are being presented that the Boris Rohman and Martina Thiele consider worth a read. She comments: »These do not have to be specialist books that deal with journalistic topics; fiction, novels, poetry collections, short stories, treatises – anything that journalists put between two covers is of interest to ›book journalism‹ and will now be presented to readers of *Journalism Research* in every issue.«

This first issue already showcases the range of authors, topics, and forms: from »Hitler's queer artist Stephanie Hollenstein« to »The shadow realm of Alexander Schalck-Golodkowski« to three current biographies of German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, from critical analyses of how to deal with the AfD or the influence of Islamic organisations to questions of individual and collective identity.

And the tried-and-tested reviews section features reviews of Henrik Müller: *Challenging economic journalism*, Lutz Hachmeister: *Hitler's interviews. The dictator and the journalists*, and Ingrid Brodnig, Florian Klenk, Gabi Waldner, Armin Wolf (eds.): *Practical journalism. A textbook for career starters and anyone who wants to know how the media works*. The latter in particular uses many examples from Austria to show that the »rare good fortune of these times, in which one can think what one wants and say what one thinks,« does not come about by itself, but must be renegotiated and reconquered again and again.

Munich, November 2025

Gabriele Hooffacker

Research Paper

Mandy Tröger⁽¹⁾

Policies of deterrence

The impact of anti-Semitism resolutions on journalism in Germany

Abstract: Since the German Bundestag passed the so-called »BDS resolution« in May 2019, the issue of anti-Semitism in Germany has not only been a subject of political and legal debates, but increasingly also of media discourse.^[2] The resolution, which condemned the BDS (boycott, divestment, and sanctions) campaign against Israel and its settlement policy as anti-Semitic (GERMAN BUNDESTAG 2019), is not legally binding. Still, according to the Bundestag cross-party initiative, it is intended to have a normative effect. The resolution has had a direct impact on public debates, for example through restricting public spaces to discuss the BDS campaign (cf. GERMAN BUNDESTAG 2020: 4ff., Tröger 2019).^[3] Since then, similar resolutions at the federal level have reinforced this development.

Keywords: news coverage Middle East, anti-Semitism resolutions, Germany, media freedom

- 1 I would like to thank Carsten Reinemann, Christian Strippel, Dominik Winkler and Nadia Zaboura for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of the German version of this article. I would also like to thank Sydney Forde, Des Freedman and Dan Schiller for their suggestions on the English version. All original quotes were translated from German into English by the author. The content of the article is the creation of the author who is also an editor of this journal; the article does not necessarily represent the views of the other editors.
- 2 The motion »Resolutely opposing the BDS movement – combating anti-Semitism« [BDS-Bewegung entschlossen entgegenzutreten – Antisemitismus bekämpfen] was adopted by the Bundestag on May 17, 2019.
- 3 For instance, city councils across Germany decided to not rent out city-owned spaces for events that might address – even remotely – the topic of BDS (cf. TRÖGER 2019).

This paper examines the impact of the so-called anti-Semitism resolutions that have been passed by the Bundestag in November 2024^[4] and spring 2025^[5] on journalism in Germany. In doing so, the article is based on the conviction that, »in view of Germany’s special historical responsibility,« it is necessary to »recognize, highlight, preserve, protect, and promote Jewish life in Germany in [its] diversity« (in MICHAELS et al. 2024). Part of this task is to question government initiatives that aim to combat anti-Semitism and to find comprehensive ways to achieve this goal while simultaneously guaranteeing political freedom and open debate. News media play a central role in publicly communicating these discussions. However, critical journalistic contributions on the resolutions and their interpretive framework (e.g., MONTAG 2024; WHITTLE 2024) have been ignored by politicians. The possible consequences of the resolutions for journalistic practice, for example in public service broadcasting, have hardly been discussed in public. Accordingly, this article examines how political decisions to combat anti-Semitism, as expressed in the resolutions, impact journalistic practice and the structuring of public debates.

This question is becoming increasingly relevant as the situation in Israel/Palestine has dramatically worsened: With its terrorist attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, Hamas killed over 1,200 people and abducted around 250 hostages; with its subsequent widespread bombing of the Gaza Strip, the Israeli military has injured, displaced, and killed several hundred thousand Palestinians to date (cf. KHATIB et al. 2024; Spagat et al. 2025). Numerous human rights organizations and various United Nation (UN) institutions have criticized the increasingly escalating starvation of the civilian population in the Gaza Strip (e.g., UNITED NATIONS 2024; MEDICO 2025; HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL 2024) and have accused the Israeli government of genocide (e.g., UNITED NATIONS 2024; AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL 2024a). This assessment is shared by a large number of international genocide researchers (e.g., BARTOV/WAKIN 2025) and, most recently, by the two Israeli human rights organizations B’Tselem (2025) and PHRI (2025). In December 2023, South Africa instituted proceedings against Israel before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on suspicion of genocide in Gaza, and the ICJ initiated subsequent proceedings. In November 2024, the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued an arrest warrant against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, among others (cf. ICC 2024a). He and other defendants are accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity (ICC 2024b). However, German Chancellor Friedrich

4 The resolution »Never again is now: Protecting, preserving, and strengthening Jewish life in Germany« [Nie wieder ist jetzt: Jüdisches Leben in Deutschland schützen, bewahren und stärken] was adopted on November 7, 2024, and encompasses anti-Semitism in art, culture, and media.

5 The resolution »Resolutely countering anti-Semitism and hostility toward Israel in schools and universities and safeguarding freedom of discourse« [Antisemitismus und Israelfeindlichkeit an Schulen und Hochschulen entschlossen entgegnetreten sowie den freien Diskursraum sichern] was adopted on January 29, 2025, and refers to anti-Semitism in the education sector.

Merz publicly announced that Netanyahu could visit Germany – despite the ICC ruling – without legal repercussions (e.g., *HANDELSBLATT* 2025). In light of these events, the question arises as to what the political and legal conditions are that enable Merz' actions, and how these conditions might impact journalists who aim to report critically on them as well as on Israel's military actions and humanitarian violations. What political, social, and journalistic spaces exist for such reporting, which ones do not exist, and why?

Within the field of journalism, these issues are at the center of professional debates – for instance at journalism conferences (e.g., the annual *Netzwerk Recherche* conference), panel discussions, networking meetings, and in sporadic independent journalistic investigations (e.g., in *SCHNEIDER* 2025). According to a study of Reporters Without Borders (RSF) (2025), the war in Gaza has been »the most difficult topic« that the 60 journalists surveyed in Germany have ever worked on (in *MEY* 2025). Not only is the working atmosphere »extremely tough,« but journalists point to »massive pressure, self-censorship, and eroding journalistic standards« in editorial offices (in *MEY* 2025). Others refer to interventions by the Israeli embassy (RSF 2025: 18; cf. also *RESCH* 2024) and criticize language regulations that go beyond conventional standards in other wars (in *SALFITI* 2024). One example is the 44-page »Glossary of Reporting on the Middle East Conflict. For internal use. As of October 18, 2023« of the German national public broadcaster ARD. According to the glossary (2023), attacks by the Israeli army are by default [in der Regel] to be described as »reactions« or »counterattacks« on military targets (3-4). Accordingly, a first content analysis of the widely viewed ARD evening news program *Tagesschau* shows that Israel's military actions are presented less as active and autonomous actions and more as contextualized and thus legitimized defensive measures. Palestinian violence, on the other hand, is consistently decontextualized and emotionalized (*GOLDMANN* 2025a). Similar patterns can also be found in other leading media outlets in Germany (*GOLDMANN* 2025b).

Journalists such as Yossi Bartal, Fabian Goldmann, Hanno Hauenstein, Kristin Helberg, Tilo Jung, Julia Neumann, and Charlotte Wiedemann question such narratives by including various perspectives on the war and by criticizing its German media coverage (see also *ZABOURA* 2025). At the same time, the editor-in-chief of the Jewish newspaper *Jüdische Allgemeine*, Philipp Peyman Engel, proclaims that the »level of disinformation, conscious or unconscious, in anti-Israel reporting ... has long since reached its limit« (*ENGEL* 2025). Regardless of the specific perspective, public criticism of the one-sided media coverage of the war in Gaza in Germany is growing (*ZAPP* 2024). The long-term study *Media Trust 2024* illustrates this: »In 2024, Germans are most critical of media coverage of the war in the Gaza Strip, which was surveyed for the first time. 27 percent trust the reports mostly or completely« (*FAWZI et al.* 2024: 11). Yet, the German academic

community, for instance in communication studies, hardly comments on the topic at all (in STRIPPEL et al. 2025).

This article reflects on and discusses issues of journalistic practice in the context of current policies in Germany. It is based on five expert interviews with Stephan Detjen (DEUTSCHLANDFUNK), Prof. Andreas Engelmann (University of Labor, Frankfurt/Main), Prof. Carsten Reinemann (University of Munich), Nadia Zaboura (visiting scholar at Free University [FU] Berlin), and local journalist Miri Watson (*Schwäbisches Tagblatt*).⁶ In addition, the article draws on existing surveys of journalists (e.g., RSF 2025; SCHNEIDER 2025).

The anti-Semitism resolution and anti-Semitism related to the State of Israel

The motion »Never again is now: Protecting, preserving, and strengthening Jewish life in Germany« was passed by the German Bundestag in November 2024. The resolution states that »there must be no room for anti-Semitism in the arts, culture, and media« (GERMAN BUNDESTAG 2024: 3). To this end, it must be ensured »that no organizations or projects are financially supported that spread anti-Semitism, question Israel’s right to exist, call for a boycott of Israel, or actively support the BDS movement« (2). Accordingly, the resolution calls on federal, state, and local authorities to review cultural and academic projects for »anti-Semitic narratives« (2) before releasing funding. »In order to ensure the most effective fight against anti-Semitism,« the resolution further calls for »consistent use of repressive measures« (3), for example in criminal law and in residence, asylum, and citizenship law. Andreas Engelmann, professor of law at the University of Labour, describes the resolution as a »shadow constitution« [Schattenverfassung] (ENGELMANN 2024): on the one hand, it is not legally binding, but on the other hand, it provides a powerful political framework for instrumentalising accusations of anti-Semitism – including with reference to journalism (see also TRÖGER 2024a).

As in the BDS resolution and in previous years, the resolution is based on the working definition of antisemitism developed by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) (cf. GERMAN BUNDESTAG 2024: 2–3). This

6 The journalists were selected based on the type of media outlet and journalistic practice (Detjen [national public broadcaster], Watson [private local newspaper]); the academics were selected based on their research field and thematic expertise (Reinemann [communication studies], Engelmann [law], Zaboura [Israel/Gaza coverage]). The author joined a panel with Reinemann on the role of German communication studies in the context of the Middle East discourse (STRIPPEL et al. 2025). In addition, there were several off-the-record conversations. All interviews were held in the fall of 2024 and spring of 2025. It was extremely difficult to find interviewees who were willing to give non-anonymous interviews on the record. All interviewees (also off-the-record) were critical of the resolutions for various reasons. Many thanks to the experts who were willing to give non-anonymous interviews.

definition was developed by the IHRA at a conference in Bucharest in May 2016; it was widely disseminated and thus became the politically validated language in Germany. The IHRA working definition expands the concept of anti-Semitism and shifts the focus to anti-Semitism related to the State of Israel [israelbezogener Antisemitismus]. Accordingly, anti-Semitic manifestations »might include the targeting of the State of Israel, conceived as a Jewish collectivity. However, criticism of Israel similar to that leveled against any other country might not be regarded antisemitic« (IHRA 2025). This framework definition was later supplemented by eleven concrete examples (cf. AMBOS et al. 2023). According to those, »claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor« or »comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis« (IHRA 2025) are considered to be anti-Semitic. The claim of genocide against Palestinians in Gaza can therefore be interpreted as being anti-Semitic if, for example, it draws parallels with Nazi Germany.

At the same time, the question arises as to how criticism of one warring party such as Israel can be compared with criticism of other warring parties when both the historical context of the conflict, and the military and humanitarian situation in Gaza are unprecedented. According to the IHRA (2025), here, context matters – based on the »non-legally binding working definition of antisemitism« (IHRA 2025), one needs to account for overall context (see also AMBOS et al. 2023; STERN 2021). The Research Service of the German Bundestag has since »denied any legally binding character« of the definition (MONTAG 2024). Nevertheless, it provides the language for the resolutions of the German Bundestag. Attempts to differentiate »legitimate« criticism of the Israeli government from »illegitimate« criticism of the State of Israel often end up in linguistic rules, diagrams, and visual guidelines (e.g., AMADEU ANTONIO FOUNDATION 2016: 15). Legal scholar Christoph Möllers calls these attempts at definitions »boxed in« (in BOLWIN 2024).

The question of legitimate journalistic work and criticism

Various experts have criticized the IHRA definition and the political and institutional history of the resolution (e.g., ASSMANN 2025; in WHITTLE 2024), including the co-author of the definition Kenneth Stern (2021, in CORTELESSA 2020; in LENZ 2024). They point, for instance, to distorted concepts of anti-Semitism related to the State of Israel and their instrumentalization, or they emphasize the validity of alternative concepts and definitions of anti-Semitism (e.g., in MICHAELS et al. 2024). Other experts defend this interpretation, for example in the context of postcolonialism, using the works of Edward Said and Judith Butler as case studies (PFAHL-TRAUGHBER 2025). How difficult it is to distinguish

between legitimate and illegitimate critique, especially for journalism, becomes clear in concrete examples, such as Israel's settlement policy: From the perspective of the ICC, the UN, the European Union, and many Western states, including Germany, Israel's settlement policy in the West Bank is illegal because it violates international law (cf. FEDERAL FOREIGN OFFICE 2025). Their criticism is based on international law and is directed against the actions and policies of the Israeli government. Under the right-wing nationalist leader Netanyahu, this government has intensified its settlement policies and legalized settlements; the government legitimizes its actions partly on religious grounds and with reference to Israel's right to exist. Accordingly, the government interprets resistance to the settlements as being inherently anti-Semitic because it views criticism of settlements as delegitimizing the State of Israel – even though the state itself continues to occupy and settle foreign territory (cf. HIDALGO 2022). It follows that the question of critique is a question of legal and discursive grounds.

By adopting the definition of anti-Semitism related to the State of Israel as the core of the BDS resolution and the so-called anti-Semitism resolution of November 2024, the German government (and thus public discourse in Germany) is increasingly adopting the interpretative framework and interpretative power of the Israeli government. The legal basis of international law, on the other hand, loses out in the chosen interpretation and application of anti-Semitism – to the detriment of principles of international law such as the UN Charter of universal human rights of 1945, which emerged from the horror of World War II and the Holocaust. So far, the German government has attempted to resolve this paradox through a political practice of uncompromised loyalty to the State of Israel. The resolution of November 2024 exemplifies this – it focuses Germany's historical responsibility on the State of Israel while at the same time undermining Germany's historical responsibility for universal principles of international law and their observance. This discursive shift explains, at least in part, why Chancellor Merz feels emboldened to invite Netanyahu to Germany, *despite* and contrary to the international arrest warrant issued by the ICC. By adopting the concept of anti-Semitism related to the State of Israel in the resolutions, the political leeway of the Israeli government has increased (regardless of its respective political agenda). This reduces the scope of discourse on the question of whether and how this leeway can be publicly and thus journalistically criticized in Germany.

Nevertheless, prior to the resolution's adoption, several scholars, lawyers, and journalists have criticized its defining framework and political implications (e.g., MONTAG 2024). For example, in the national newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), a group of scholars pointed out that the resolution did exactly what it sought to prevent, namely »restricting Jews to a particular view or way of life and portraying them as a homogeneous group representing uniform positions« (MICHAELS et al. 2024). Respectively, the independent communications

studies researcher and FU visiting scholar Nadia Zaboura states that the standardizations, generalizations, and the lack of precision due to definitional inaccuracies, which are inherent in the resolution's language, hardly allow for legitimate criticism:

Anyone who criticizes Israel is quickly labeled an anti-Semite in Germany. Here, it is important to clearly distinguish between unsubstantiated, i.e., instrumentalized accusations of anti-Semitism and rightful criticism of actual anti-Semitism: The former repeatedly involves a collective equation of the State of Israel with Jews – even if criticism is directed against government actions and not against Jews. *According to the IHRA definition, this equation is problematic.* [Highlighted by the author, M.T.]

In consequence, the group of scholars in the *FAZ* suggested alternative language for the resolution, underlining Jewish plurality and ensuring the resolution's compatibility with the German Basic Law and international law. Open letters (e.g., *Wir begrüßen*, 2024) and various human rights organizations supported these suggestions (in *AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL 2024b*). The German Bundestag rejected them.

Resolution for universities and research

Instead, the Bundestag passed another resolution. The motion »Resolutely countering anti-Semitism and hostility toward Israel in schools and universities and safeguarding freedom of discourse« was passed in the spring of 2025 (*GERMAN BUNDESTAG 2025*). One reason for this resolution was the increase of anti-Semitic incidents in Germany. According to the Federal Association of Departments for Research and Information on Antisemitism (*RIAS*), there were 8,627 such incidents in 2024. »This represents an increase of almost 77% compared to 2023.« (*RIAS 2025: 10*) Also *RIAS* works based on the definition of anti-Semitism related to the State of Israel, which was the most frequent form of anti-Semitism in the report – with a total of 5,857 incidents, or just under 70 percent (11). These incidents include, for example, the damage to property with symbols or content interpreted to be anti-Semitic (e.g., stickers such as »From the river to the sea – Palestine will be free«^[7]), as well as threats and verbal or written statements (e.g., graffiti of the red triangle – a symbol associated with Hamas to mark enemies) (29). According to the report, 450 of these incidents took place at educational and academic institutions (11).^[8]

7 German jurisprudence is inconsistent regarding the criminal liability of this slogan (*BROCKHAUS et al. 2024; BROCKHAUS 2025*).

8 A second study by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (*BMBF*) from 2025 concludes that anti-Semitic attitudes among university students remain unchanged. Approximately six to seven percent of students hold anti-Semitic views, meaning that anti-Semitism is less prevalent among students than in the general population (cf. *BMBF 2025*).

The resolution was the German government's response to these developments and figures (GERMAN BUNDESTAG 2025: 1). It emphasizes that »anti-Semitism and hostility toward Israel have no place in schools and universities« (1) and refers, for example, to protests and protest camps against the war in Gaza at German universities, where »anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic slogans« (1) were being spread. To counteract this trend, the resolution proposes specific means and measures on how anti-Semitism should be researched and taught at universities according to fields and disciplines (3ff.). With regard to the BDS resolution (GERMAN BUNDESTAG 2019), it emphasizes that BDS supporters »have no place in German educational and research institutions« (GERMAN BUNDESTAG 2025: 6).

Once again, the resolution is not legally binding but serves as an appeal to other authorities. These authorities are to base their assessment of possible anti-Semitic incidents on the Bundestag's »perception of reality« (cf. MANN/YONA 2024); they then are to apply the law in accordance with its interpretation. The resolution thus establishes a powerful discursive framework according to which German administrations can legitimize and delegitimize academic discourse and funding. For example, the resolution's emphasis »that research excellence and anti-Semitism are mutually exclusive« (GERMAN BUNDESTAG 2025: 6) might impact decision-making processes for funding universities under the Excellence Initiative.⁹ The first consequences of the resolution showed already: Felix Klein, the Federal Government's Commissioner Against Anti-Semitism¹⁰, is calling for universities to be monitored by the intelligence service Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (EWERT et al. 2025). Several Jewish and non-Jewish scholars who criticize Israel's policies or describe the actions in Gaza as genocide have been disinvited, and events have been cancelled (cf. REINECKE 2024). Initiatives such as the »Archive of Silence« are attempting to document these incidents (cf. ARCHIVE OF SILENCE 2025).

Various scholars criticize the resolution, its defining framework, its stipulations regarding research and teaching, as well as the threat it poses to freedom of research protected by the German Basic Law (e.g., ASSMANN 2025; KRISOL 2025; in GRIMM et al. 2025). Klein, however, sees no conflict with the Basic Law. He underlines that he is fulfilling a mandate that has been »formulated by the German Bundestag in several resolutions« (quoted in SANDER 2020).¹¹ Freedom of expression – for example, with regard to BDS – remained intact. According to him, the

9 The Excellence Initiative is aimed to promote top-level research and to improve the quality of German universities and research institutions. In the first funding period (January 1, 2019 to December 31, 2025) a total of 57 Clusters of Excellence (EXC) are being funded with an annual budget of 385 million Euro. In addition, in the first funding period (2019 to 2026) ten Universities of Excellence and one University Consortium of Excellence are being funded with 148 million Euro annually (DFG 2025).

10 This office was created by means of a Bundestag resolution in 2018 (HEYER 2020).

11 According to the Bundestag resolution from 2018, this mandate is to contribute across departments to »raising awareness in society of current and historical forms of anti-Semitism through public relations work and political and cultural education« (cited in HEYER 2020). For this purpose, Klein has eleven employees and a

issue at stake is taxpayers' money and the question of whether »we finance artists and intellectuals who question Israel's right to exist« (cited in DETJEN 2020b). To distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate critique, Klein uses the so-called 3-D test that has been in circulation since 2003. He, thus, asks whether Israel is being *demonized* and *delegitimized* and whether *double standards* are being applied (cf. SHARANSKY 2004). With this test, »the matter« – such as the case of Cameroonian historian and political scientist Achille Mbembe (see below) – is seemingly made empirically verifiable and »clear« (cited in HEYER 2020).

Yet, the scholarly debate on the matter shows that it is not so clear-cut (cf. HIDALGO 2022). Political scientist Peter Lintl and sociologist Peter Ullrich, for instance, criticize the test for being »schematic and undifferentiated«: delegitimization, demonization, and double standards are communication strategies used by various sides in the Middle East conflict and many other conflicts. In this respect, the test does not help to identify specifically anti-Semitic semantics (LINTL/ULLRICH 2024: 91). According to the author of the test, the then Israeli Minister for Social Affairs Natan Sharansky, criticism of Israel is anti-Semitic, if it equates Israel with apartheid and does not recognize it as a Jewish state (cited in DENZ 2008: 138). Respectively, also the aforementioned ARD glossary (2023) for journalists states: »Israel is not an apartheid state. To claim otherwise demonizes and delegitimizes the Israeli state (see 3-D test).« (24) Following Sharansky, international legal norms need to be viewed critically in this debate. At the 2008 Global Forum for Combating Antisemitism conference, he emphasized »that ›human rights‹ had become a tool in the fight against Israel« (cited in Denz 2008: 138). »Many enemies of Israel wanted a ›democratic state for all inhabitants‹ and explicitly ›not a Jewish state‹.« (cited in DENZ 2008: 138) How journalists, however, should describe a state that – according to Sharansky – is not a state for all its inhabitants but also not an apartheid state, the ARD glossary does not specify.

Despite this paradox, the 3-D test serves to legitimize commissioner Klein's political actions. With the help of the test, he accused the postcolonial theorist Mbembe of anti-Semitic reasoning because Mbembe compares the Israeli occupation to the apartheid regime in South Africa. In consequence, Klein asked for Mbembe to be disinvited from a public event in Germany (in HEYER 2020). In doing so, Klein ignored the crucial fact that comparing (not equating) case studies are important means of knowledge production in scholarship (cf. GESSEN 2023). At the same time, he delegitimized the work of renowned academics, politicians, and Nobel Prize winners who argue similarly from historical or legal points of view (e.g., CARTER 2006). For Klein, this does not seem to be a contradiction. »All three ›Ds‹ apply to Mbembe,« he says (cited in HEYER 2020) and

budget of one million Euro at his disposal. Klein is assigned to the Federal Ministry of the Interior, but no one there is authorized to issue directives (HEYER 2020).

thus bases his political actions on a decontextualized and academically removed interpretation of the historical presence.

The question of media

The sort of intelligence service scenarios that Klein calls for with regard to universities do not yet exist for media in Germany. Nevertheless, Carsten Reinemann, professor of communication studies at the University of Munich, speaks of a possible »chilling effect«: »Journalists or editorial offices could avoid certain topics or present them in a one-sided manner for fear of public pressure or political sanctions.« According to the RSF study (2025), this is already the case (see also RESCH 2024). Reinemann sees the resolution as an attempt of the state to intervene in a process to define discursive norms. This process should be dynamic and characterized by plurality, thus, requiring constant social negotiation. »When anti-Semitism, criticism of Israel, and *Staatsräson*¹² are mentioned in the same breath, it establishes a problematic interpretive framework,« says Reinemann.

This interpretative framework is not an abstract problem – especially for publicly funded media such as public service broadcasting. Here, the resolution provides a gateway for content guidelines and staff decisions (e.g., through commission and committee work). This is because resources, funding, and jobs could be made dependent on how critically or uncritically journalists report on various widely debated issues, such as Netanyahu’s invitation to Germany, German arms exports to Israel (GUELER 2025), or the recently decided halt to new arms export licenses (e.g., SCHILLER 2025).¹³ The assessment of what constitutes legitimate or illegitimate criticism is then based on a set of rules that deviates from the principles of international law, which applies otherwise. How journalists should deal with this exclusive situation remains a mystery. Because while they can demand human rights, for example, from Russia, China, the US, and Germany, they risk being accused of anti-Semitism (related to the State of Israel) when it comes to Israeli settlement policy or Israel’s human rights violations in Gaza.

Stephan Detjen, lawyer, historian, and head of the Berlin studio of Deutschlandfunk, a national public radio station, fears that this will lead to increasing »regulation« of editorial work at public broadcasters. »Open

12 The term *Staatsräson* or »reasons of state« describes the primacy of state interests over all other interests, or the necessity of the state as opposed to individual reason. After the Hamas attacks on October 7, 2023, German state representatives voiced unwavering support for Israel. Then Chancellor Olaf Scholz emphasized in the German Bundestag: »(A)t this moment there is only one place for Germany. The place beside Israel. That’s what we mean by saying: Israel’s security is German *Staatsräson*« (cited in WIENER 2024).

13 In 2023, the German government approved arms export to Israel worth 326 million Euro; in 2024, the figure was 161 million Euro (in GUELER 2025). On August 8, 2025, the German government decided »until further notice« not to supply Israel with any military equipment that could be used in Gaza (cited in BÖHM 2025). Arms exports already approved for the current and coming years are not affected by the ban.

directives from above, fear of reactions from supervisory bodies and politicians, and indirect pressure to conform« could create a problematic climate in editorial offices on a topic that is highly controversial. When in doubt, journalists then might shy away from expressing their opinions, addressing sensitive issues, or giving a platform to marginalized voices. In the fall of 2024, the General Secretariat of the ARD (see above) sent an email to all editorial offices advertising a seminar on »Anti-Semitism in Media.« This seminar was organized by commissioner Klein in collaboration with the German Cultural Council – according to Detjen, from a »completely one-sided point of view.« At conferences and workshops, other journalists speak of similar training courses and events, and increasing activities on the part of anti-Semitism commissioners.

According to Zaboura, journalists talk about »fear, isolation, internal conflicts, even threats to their careers« when they are trying to address the suffering of the people in Gaza or the actions of the Israeli military. This impacted both *white* journalists and journalists of color, with the latter also facing racism. Zaboura's observations are similar to the findings of the aforementioned RSF study. In it, TV reporter Sophia Maier, who has set herself the goal of showing the suffering of both sides, talks of »new dimensions of hatred that I am experiencing. This has also been the case for other colleagues since October 7, 2023.« After Maier addressed the impact of Israeli military attacks on the civilian population in Gaza, she received insults such as: »Die, you filthy pig,« »Anti-Semitic pest of Nazi descent,« and » Hamas cunt« (RSF 2025: 19). The resolution does not appear to be decisive for such hostility, but it does provide a quasi-legal basis for accusations against journalists of reproducing anti-Semitic narratives.

In this context, Middle East expert Prof. Kai Hafez also points to the lack of expertise on the history of the conflict (in STRIPPEL et al. 2025: 7). Many journalists and academics in Germany feel that the Israel/Palestine conflict is too complicated to be able to take a critical stance (in TRÖGER 2024b). »This knowledge deficit can be found both in society as a whole and in German editorial offices – and it is being exploited politically,« concludes Zaboura, »also through media reporting that, out of ignorance, fear, and the reproduction of racist stereotypes, repeatedly evades the basic journalistic claim of controlling power through journalism« (see also Zaboura in MEDIENMAGAZIN 2025: 10ff.). Zaboura names international politics as an example: When right-wing forces around the world, such as the governments of Hungary and the US, as well as the right-wing party Alternative for Germany (AfD), present themselves as Israel's greatest friends while simultaneously exploiting anti-Semitism for political purposes, Zaboura believes it is the task of journalism to address this issue critically. Journalists need to reflect on these dynamics and create spaces for broader deliberative debates as part of German democracy. However, such comprehensive views are currently lacking on a broad scale – both in journalism and academia.

Criticism in media and academia

Such discursive omissions, and the normative shifts in the resolutions are forcing federal and state institutions, universities, cultural institutions, editorial offices, and journalists to take a stand on the question whether criticism of Israeli policies and the representation of human suffering in Gaza are worth exposing themselves to social pressure, possible repressions, and budget cuts.

Andreas Keller, deputy chairman and higher education expert at the German Education Union (GEW), comments on this in relation to academia: »Anti-Semitism is [...] a crime. However, it must be possible to criticize the policies of the Israeli government, for example with regard to the current war in Gaza, without being blacklisted by the Ministry of Education.« (cited in GEW 2024) The resolutions provide the political basis for such blacklists. Legal actions against them are hardly possible because the resolutions »only look like laws, but they are not,« emphasizes Detjen. This means that the resolutions have no legal effect and are therefore »not litigable. If they were passed as laws, they would be unconstitutional.« This is because infringements of fundamental rights protected by the German Basic Law, such as the freedom of expression and academic freedom, require a firm legal basis and are subject to a review process developed by the Federal Constitutional Court. The court determines whether an infringement is appropriate, necessary, and proportionate – even in cases as important as combating anti-Semitism. In the case of the resolutions, this basis does not exist because the expanded definition of anti-Semitism (related to the State of Israel) is ambiguous and often contextual (DETJEN 2020b; ENGELMANN 2024).

Nevertheless, based on the resolutions, commissioner Klein calls for more restrictive measures in the arts and education, for example by means of »tougher action against protests at universities« (in DER SPIEGEL 2025). Whether such restrictive interventions are actually conducive to combating anti-Semitism and help »safeguarding freedom of discourse« (GERMAN BUNDESTAG 2025) is doubtful, especially in light of the situation in the US. The Trump administration's fight against anti-Semitism serves as a pretext for attacking academic freedom and higher education as such (cf. JACOBSON 2025; TOLAND 2025). It is thus important to ask how the practice of increased control in Germany could be similarly instrumentalized under changed political conditions.

All experts interviewed for this article consider the infringements of fundamental rights based on the resolutions as highly problematic. Reinemann emphasizes this with regard to academia: »Our task is to critically analyze processes and enable pluralistic perspectives.« Academics must therefore defend themselves against any such inadmissible interferences and authoritative provisions. According to him, the same applies to journalism.

Pressures on journalism at the local and national level

Miri Watson is a reporter working for the local newspaper *Schwäbisches Tagblatt* in the university town of Tübingen. She is one of 60 journalists interviewed for the RSF study. Watson says she tries to »cover major political issues locally, for example by talking to people whose families live in Israel or Gaza.« She writes about local protests, pro-Palestinian camps at the University of Tübingen, and the city's new district partnership with the Israeli district of Hof HaCarmel since May 2024. »I have always made a point of presenting different perspectives, which has been met with criticism from some colleagues. Some fear that I could unintentionally reproduce anti-Semitic narratives. In some cases, I have been directly accused of that.« Watson recalls an »open letter to the editor-in-chief demanding that I no longer write about Israel/Palestine.« Although there is »no formal gag order,« there is pressure by colleagues, some of which is carried out publicly. Watson describes the emotional strain as high and the public defamation of her work as exhausting. Other journalists report similar experiences (e.g., in RSF 2025).

For local journalists in particular, social pressures and conflicting roles can become problematic. Readers often know their faces, names, or even where they live; sometimes they meet in the same bars and restaurants (cf. GRIEBAU 2023: 247ff.). »I am not anonymous,« says Watson. »That changes the perception of risk.« As a result, the fear of direct confrontation or even hostility can influence editorial decisions (RSF 2025). »When I write about certain topics, I sometimes get strong reactions – letters to the editor, emails.«

Watson believes that the so-called anti-Semitism resolutions have no direct influence on these dynamics. »Formally, the resolutions don't impact us.« Since they were passed at the federal level, her newspaper did not report on them: »There were no local angles.« Nevertheless, Watson sees a danger that such resolutions could reinforce existing uncertainties about the term anti-Semitism, making it even harder for journalists to address the issue in a nuanced way. »These resolutions shape our perception and delegitimize voices that refer to different definitions of anti-Semitism,« she says. In the newsroom, however, »such topics are hardly ever discussed.«

Also Detjen points out the small number of journalists in newsrooms who actually recognize the problem as such. The vast majority simply says, »I am against anti-Semites,« without asking about social or historical contexts or reflecting on questions of definition. One example is the above mentioned anti-Semitism statistics published by RIAS (RIAS 2025). According to Detjen, these statistics are »totally problematic« because they provide figures without sufficient background information. If every »settler colonialism« sticker is counted as an anti-Semitic incident and Klein then presents these figures at the Federal Press Conference (cf. JUNG & NAIIV 2024: 41ff.), it requires journalists

who understand the context and can critically classify both the numbers and the language (e.g., HESSE 2025). Too often, this is not the case, Detjen says. Those who do attempt such contextualization are »marked to such an extent that it overshadows everything else.« Detjen, who serves as chief correspondent for public national broadcaster Deutschlandradio in Berlin and describes the German Middle East discourse as a »side beat« of his work, recounts how politicians approached him at the Federal Press Ball about his supposed »pro-Palstinian stance.« »Suddenly, you're just the one who takes a position on the issue – because it's so unusual,« he states.

The Detjen case

For Detjen, a turning point was his public dispute with Felix Klein, the Federal Government's Commissioner Against Anti-Semitism. When Klein accused historian Achille Mbembe of anti-Semitic reasoning in spring 2020 (see above), Detjen wrote – what he calls – a »sharp commentary« on Deutschlandfunk. Klein, he wrote, was a »discursive gatekeeper« and »civil religious guardian of the faith« who was using his state mandate to »banish an internationally renowned scholar from the German discourse« (DETJEN 2020a). In doing so, Klein »is adopting a strategy used by lobby groups that instrumentalize an unbounded concept of anti-Semitism. Political or scholarly criticism of Israel's occupation policy is thus systematically being delegitimized« (DETJEN 2020a).

This critique was followed by a public debate: In an interview with the news magazine *Der Spiegel*, Klein defended his actions, the BDS resolution, and his criticism of Mbembe's alleged anti-Semitism. He described Detjen's »gatekeeper« analogy as a »shabby argument!« »So unbalanced, and this on public broadcasting.« At least, according to Klein, the author was now getting »due pressure« via calls for his dismissal (cited in HEYER 2020). According to Detjen, there were no such calls (also in DETJEN 2020b).

Detjen responded in an article for the national newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), in which he argued from a legal perspective why the BDS resolution was problematic. Although the resolution fell short of an outright ban and functioned merely as a warning – comparable, for example, to food warnings – German jurisprudence requires the strictest standards of due diligence for such warnings. These criteria, however, did not exist in the case of the anti-Semitism resolution due to definitional ambiguities. Detjen concluded that when »the line between the necessary fight against anti-Semitism and the suppression of politically legitimate criticism is being blurred,« the fear of being accused of anti-Semitism inevitably increases (DETJEN 2020b). He further argued that Klein's handling of criticism regarding his leadership role did little to dispel

these fears (Detjen 2020b). Klein subsequently intervened, contacting the program director of Deutschlandradio to complain about the FAZ article. Klein later had to apologize for these actions; but according to Detjen, the personal attacks continued nonetheless.

Looking back, Detjen describes this dispute and Klein's behavior as an »interesting process« that exposes the broader mechanisms behind the resolutions. »A government official attacks a journalist using outrageous methods,« he says. This is »totally being noticed« by colleagues. The underlying message, according to Detjen, is clear: »If I express criticism, the federal government will come after me.« As an established journalist who covers many topics and is »actually highly respected,« Detjen himself does not feel threatened. Yet he acknowledges that his voice carries a »special weight.« For younger journalists or those in more precarious positions, however, the implicit warning could be enough to discourage them from expressing similar criticism. Although senior government officials repeatedly assured him that Klein's actions did not reflect the federal government's official stance, Detjen warns that this could change under a different administration, leaving such abuses of authority unpunished. »My mistake was that I didn't make more of a fuss about it,« he concludes.

Free media between theory and practice

For communication studies researcher Reinemann, the matter is clear: »Journalists must report, research, contextualize, and stand up to pressure. When editorial offices hold back for fear of reactions from certain media outlets or political camps, that is cause for concern,« he says. In practice, however, reporting on Israel/Palestine over the past two years has looked quite different. The RSF study underscores this emphatically:

Freelance journalists explain that, given the uncertainty in editorial offices and their fear of being accused of »anti-Semitism related to the State of Israel« by other media outlets, they have begun to avoid topics that are perceived as sensitive. Quite a few also feel pressured by frequent and massive interventions by the Israeli embassy or the German-Israeli Society at editorial offices. [...] Many journalists also express fear of being exposed in the [tabloid] newspaper BILD. [...] Similar accusations have been made against influential pro-Palestinian influencers and activists for inciting hatred against journalists from public broadcasters. (RSF 2025: 18–19)

Such reports are sobering. They raise fundamental questions about media freedom. At the same time, they highlight the need for social, academic, and journalistic debate on the political possibilities and limitations of critical media coverage of the Israel/Palestine conflict in Germany. This remains the case despite the German government's increasingly critical stance on human rights

violations in Gaza and recent shifts in media reporting. Alignments between political agendas and media coverage nevertheless appear to persist (see Bennett 1990).

Over the past two years, journalists have held back from reporting on Israel/Palestine or criticizing Israel out of fear of losing their jobs. They point to cases in which employment contracts were not renewed because of their reporting or because of private social media posts (18). According to journalist Armin Ghassim, this mainly affects journalists of color and those with migrant backgrounds (in NETZWERK RECHERCHE 2025: 25; 20ff.). Detjen states that such direct dismissals remain the exception. However, visible political positioning could influence hiring decisions and the employment prospects of freelance journalists. Freelance reporters such as Hanno Hauenstein (2024a), Fabian Goldmann (in REIMANN 2025), and others (in SCHNEIDER 2025; RSF 2025) describe losing assignments, lacking editorial support, being informally excluded, or even being removed from the topic by their editors. It follows that a number of German journalists have turned to writing for international media (e.g., HAUENSTEIN 2024b). Watson warns that this trend could render already underrepresented voices – such as those of journalists of color or without German citizenship – even less visible.

Conclusion

The so-called anti-Semitism resolutions of the German Bundestag mark a significant shift in the relationship between political regulation, journalistic practice, and public discourse. By adopting a broader definition of anti-Semitism – in particular, anti-Semitism directly related to the State of Israel – the discursive references of German politics and journalistic debate are shifting. Politically defined loyalties toward the State of Israel are taking precedence over universal norms of international law. This gives state actors such as the Israeli government under right-wing nationalist Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who legitimizes Israeli military and geopolitical actions in Gaza with Israel's right to exist, the power to define what is to be considered anti-Semitic in Germany. As a result, also the journalistic discourse runs the risk of distancing itself from international legal norms (for instance, the validity of human rights for the people of Gaza) and of applying human rights selectively and exclusively to certain countries and populations. These normative and discursive ruptures may have incalculable consequences for trust in journalism, media and democracy in Germany.

The case of Stephan Detjen exemplifies how informal political interventions can influence editorial processes and exert structural pressures on journalists. This undermines the democratic balance between independent, critical media

work and political power. The widespread reluctance of journalists and academics to engage with the resolutions further points to a climate of uncertainty, which results not least from a politicized interpretation of anti-Semitism.

All experts interviewed for this article recognize anti-Semitism to be a serious problem in Germany and at the same time criticize the current resolutions as an inappropriate and counterproductive instrument for combating it (see also MICHAELS et al. 2024). The protection of Jewish life and the defense of democratic public discourse require the precise, contextualized use of norms and language as well as journalistic working conditions that enable critical reporting. The so-called anti-Semitism resolutions do not support either. Instead, they create a gateway for arbitrary state control through quasi-legal regulations. This arbitrariness runs parallel to the applicable law; it becomes manifest in self-censorship in media, art, and research, the cuts of funding and threats thereof, or the end of media careers.

Journalists have little influence on these conditions, but they can feel their impact – *directly*, for instance, in public media through the distribution of resources, funds, and jobs; *indirectly*, for instance, in private media companies through fear or editorial self-censorship. This is why broader social awareness of the problem is needed together with comprehensive academic, civil society, and journalistic debates to protect and strengthen institutionalized editorial spaces.

The resolutions, as well as the actions of the respective state actors, undermine such debates. First, because the resolutions provide a powerful discursive framework for instrumentalized accusations against journalists who criticize the policies of the Israeli government of reproducing anti-Semitic narratives. Second, because the resolutions rely on state power and repression. They thus provide blueprints for political forces that – in the future – could gain access to both these processes and the respective structures of control (e.g., lists, regulations, institutions), such as the far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD). The resolutions benefit the AfD and other extremists because they divide rather than unite, and they rely on exclusive rather than universal rights. The resolutions further ignore other marginalized groups in Germany (e.g., Islamophobia, anti-Palestinian racism, and other forms of group-focused enmity). Instead, by contrasting Judaism and Islam or Israel and Palestine in binaries and by externalizing anti-Semitism in part onto Arab migrants, they tend to promote such group-focused marginalization. They thus undermine the emphasis on the need to combat *all* crimes against humanity. In the light of these issues, it is necessary to question both the effectiveness of the resolutions in combating anti-Semitism, as well as their impact on critical journalism in Germany based on universal human rights.

Translation by Mandy Tröger

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Focus: Press Freedom and Right-Wing Extremism

Gunter Reus

Looking back – to see today

The fight for the freedom of the press in 1733

Historical analogies are always somewhat questionable. And yet, when reading the following text, it is difficult not to think of the current situation in the US.

It was published in 1733 by the publisher, printer, and journalist John Peter Zenger (1697–1746) in the weekly newspaper New-York Weekly JOURNAL. The article was not written by him, but by one of his correspondents, who remained anonymous and was probably one of the democratically oriented authors of the Cato's Letters distributed in Great Britain.

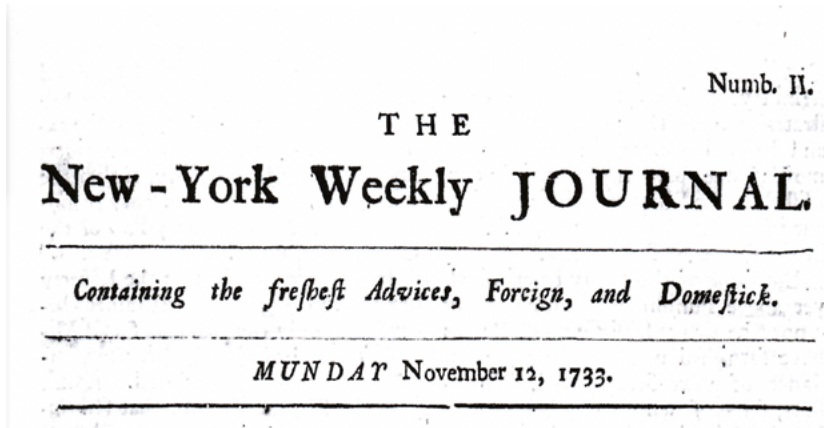
Like Donald Trump's grandfather 175 years later, Zenger came to New York from the Palatinate as a young man. He became an apprentice and employee at the city's only newspaper at the time, the New-York Gazette. He then set up his own business and established his own publishing house. From 1733 to 1751, he published his Weekly JOURNAL which not only competed with the Gazette, but also distinguished him as a sharp critic of the autocratic and self-aggrandizing governor of New York, William Cosby. Zenger repeatedly printed articles against the representative of the British crown. Cosby was furious and, in early 1734, had copies of the JOURNAL publicly burned on Wall Street and offered a reward of £50 to anyone who revealed the names of the anonymous authors. A few months later, Cosby had Zenger thrown into prison for libel. However, the subsequent trial ended with a sensation: Zenger was acquitted without conditions. His lawyers had succeeded in convincing the grand jury that this was a matter of »truth« and »the cause of liberty.«

The acquittal is particularly noteworthy (and a milestone in us press history) because at that time there was no guaranteed freedom of the press in the North American colonies. This was only guaranteed after independence with the Bill of Rights and the first amendment to the Constitution in 1791, which prohibited Congress from restricting the freedom of the press. When the following text refers to the »freedom of the press« as »part of our Constitution,« the author cannot yet invoke a written law, but rather invokes the political principle of a »limited« monarchy in England. What is astonishing here is the broad understanding of the public

sphere. The author writes that even the »damage« that the press may cause to some is acceptable and »insignificant compared to the benefits that the freedom of the press grants us.«

This almost 300-year-old pamphlet, which we are publishing as a »guest contribution« from times past, shows how far the United States has fallen back historically under Donald Trump and his attacks on media freedom.

Fig. 1



The New-York Weekly Journal

[...] There are two Sorts of Monarchies, an absolute und a limited one. In the first, the Liberty of the Press can never be maintained, it is inconsistent with it; for what absolute Monarch would suffer any Subject to animadvert on his Actions, when it is in his Power to declare the Crime, and to nominare the Punishment? This would make it very dangerous to exercise such a Liberty. Besides the Object against which those Pens must be directed, is their Sovereign, the sole supream Magistrate; for there being no Law in those Monarchies, but the Will of the Prince, it makes it necessary for his Ministers to consult his Pleasure, before any Thing can be undertaken: He ist therefore properly chargeable with the Grievances of his Subjects, and what the Minister there acts being in Obediance to the Prince, he ought not to incur the Hatred of the People; for it would be hard to impute that to him for a Crime, which is the Fruit of his Allegiance, and for refusing which he might incur the Penalties of Treason. Besides, in an absolute Monarchy, the Will of the Prince being the Law, a Liberty of the Press to complain of Grievances would be complaining against the Law, and the Constitution, to which they have submitted, or have been obliged to submit; and therefore, in one Sense, may be said to deserve Punishment, So that under an absolute Monarchy,

I say, such a Liberty is inconsistent with the Constitution, having no proper Subject in Politics, on which it might be exercis'd, and if exercis'd would incur a certain Penalty.

But in a limited Monarchy, as *England* is, our Laws are known, fixed, and established. They are the streight Rule and sure Guide to direct the King, the Ministers, and other his Subjects: And therefore an Offence against the Laws is such an Offence against the Constitution as ought to receive a pro per adequate Punishment; the several Constituents of the Government, the Ministry, and all subordinate Magistrates, having their certain, known, and limited Sphere, in which they move; one part may certainly err, misbehave, and become criminal, without involving the rest, or any of them in the Crime or Punishment.

But some of these may be criminal, yet above Punishment, which surely cannot be denied, since most Reigns have furnished us with too many Instances of powerful and wicked Ministers, some of whom by their Power have absolutely escap'd Punishment, and the Rest, who met their Fate, are likewise Instances of this Power as much to the Purpose; for it was manifest in them, that their Power had long protected them, their Crimes having often long preceeded their much desired and deserved Punishment and Reward.

That *Might ever comes Right*, or which is the same Thing, that Might preserves and defends Men from Punishment, is a Proverb established and confirmed by Time and Experience, the surest Dis-coverers of Truth and Certainty. It is therefore which makes the Liberty of the Press, in a limited Monarchy, and in all its Colonies and Plantations, proper, convenient, and necessary, or indeed it is rather incorporated and interwoven with our very Constitution; for if such an over grown Criminal, or an impudent Monster in Iniquity, cannot immediately be come at by ordinary Justice, let him yet receive the Lash of Satyr, let the glaring Truths of his ill Administration, if possible, awaken his Conscience, and if he has no Conscience, Rouze his Fear, by shewing him his Deserts, sting him with the Dread of Punishment, cover him with Shame, and render his Actions odious to all honest Minds. These Methods may in Time, and by watching and exposing his Actions, make him at least more Cautious, and perhaps at last bring down the great haughty and secure Criminal, within the Reach and Grasp of ordinary Justice. This Advantage therefore [...] Exposing the exorbitant Crimes of wicked Ministers under limited Monarchy, makes the Liberty of the Press, not only consistent with, but a necessary Part of the Constitution it self.

It is indeed urged, that the Liberty of the Press ought to be restrained, because not only the Actions of evil Ministers may be exposed, but the Character of good ones traduced. Admit it in the strongest Light, that Calumny and Lyes would prevail, and blast the Character of a great and good Minister; yet that is a less Evil than the Advantages we reap from the Liberty of the Press, as it is a Curb, a Bridle, a Terror, a Shame, and Restraint to evil Ministers; and it may be the

only Punishment, especially for a Time. But when did Calumnies and Lyes ever destroy the Character of one good Minister? Their benign Influences are known, tasted, and felt by every Body: Or if their Characters have been clouded for a Time, yet the[y] have generally shin'd forth in greater Lustre: Truth will always prevail over Falshood.

The Facts exposed are not to be believed, because said or published; but it draws Peoples Attention, directs their view, and fixes the Eye in a proper Position, that every one may judge for himself, whether those Facts are true or not. People will recollect, enquire und search, before they condemn; and therefore very few good Ministers can be hurt by Falshood, but many wicked Ones by seasonable Truth: But however the Mischief that a few may possibly, but improbably, suffer by the freedom of the Press, is not to be put in Competition with the Danger which the KING and the *People* may suffer by a shameful, cowardly Silence, under the Tyrany of an insolent, rapacious, infamous Minister. [...]

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Focus: Press Freedom and Right-Wing Extremism

Olivia Mangold

Attacks by the far right

The impact of right-wing extremist threats on journalistic practice in Germany. An interview study

Abstract: Journalists reporting on right-wing extremism are increasingly confronted with hostility, intimidation, and assault. This development endangers freedom of press and challenges fundamental democratic values. The qualitative study examines the evolution of right-wing extremist threats over the past five years and their implications for journalistic practice. It focuses on four journalists who reported in semi-structured interviews about repeated threats ranging from verbal abuse and legal intimidation to physical assaults. In response, the journalists developed various protective strategies, such as publishing anonymously, adapting their research methods, and exercising greater caution in topic selection. Despite their professional commitment to unbiased reporting, tendencies toward self-censorship and growing mistrust of state institutions became apparent. Thus, threats by right-wing extremists not only affect individuals but also structurally restrict press freedom. In order to counteract this, targeted protection measures, institutional support, and broader societal awareness are needed.

Keywords: Press freedom, right-wing extremism, threats, journalism, self-censorship

Reporting on right-wing extremist activities increasingly puts journalists at personal risks (cf. REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS 2024). While some previous studies have addressed the threat situation, little is known about the practical strategies journalists develop to cope with attacks and intimidation. This article investigates how threats from right-wing extremist actors in Germany have changed over the past five years and how they influence journalistic practice. The central

question is which individual security strategies journalists employ to continue their work despite growing risks for their personal safety.

The analysis is based on qualitative interviews with journalists who regularly report on right-wing extremism. They provide insight into personal experiences with threats and describe the countermeasures taken in their daily work. The study thus offers an empirical contribution to the ongoing research on press freedom, showing how media professionals navigate the tension between threat and independent reporting.

Press freedom under pressure

Freedom of the press is a fundamental right in democratic countries. A free press guarantees media independence and is an essential prerequisite for democracy. The press promotes the process of opinion and will formation through the dissemination of information, the opportunity to share viewpoints and express opinions, and through participation in public debate (cf. BUNDESVERFASSUNGSGERICHT 2000). However, the concept of a free press can only function if media professionals are able to report »freely, diversely, and independently« (FEDERAL GOVERNMENT 2025).

Over the past five years, the number of attacks on media professionals in Germany has increased. According to Reporters Without Borders, there were 13 attacks on journalists and media outlets in 2019, compared to 103 in 2022 (cf. REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS 2020: 1, 2023: 3). In 2023, the number of attacks fell to 41, but »even if the numbers are declining, they remain comparatively high compared to the years before the pandemic« (REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS 2024: 4). Moreover, it is likely that significant number of cases go unreported due to missing complaints and witnesses, as well as a lack of investigations and court proceedings. In 2025, 89 attacks have been documented and verified so far, 21 of which stem from conspiracy theorist and right-wing extremist circles (cf. REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS 2025b: 4).

Rising violence against media professionals in Germany is closely linked to social developments in recent years. The COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and other crises have led to polarization and insecurity, which right-wing extremist groups have exploited (cf. DEUTSCHLANDFUNK.DE 2023). According to the Verfassungsschutz [Office for the Protection of the Constitution], the number of right-wing extremists rose to 40,600 in 2023, 14,500 of whom are considered violent (cf. BMI 2024: 78). Studies indicate growing approval of right-wing extremist attitudes, especially among young people (cf. ZICK et al. 2023: 71). Digital platforms such as Telegram have played a central role in this radicalization process, for example, in the case of the »Freie Sachsen« [Free Saxons],

whose online community grew from 10,000 members to over 100,000 in 2021 (cf. DEUTSCHLANDFUNK.DE 2021). Right-wing extremism is no longer confined to the fringes of society; it has become a challenge for society as a whole.

Method

The study is based on a qualitative interview design. Guided, synchronous interviews made it possible to gain insights into the work of journalists who report on right-wing extremism.

Four journalists were interviewed who work in different media contexts and regularly cover right-wing extremist actors. The small sample includes both freelance and staff journalists at the local and national level who have experienced direct threats as well as legal intimidation attempts. David Janzen is a freelance journalist focusing on right-wing extremism. For 30 years, he has reported on neo-Nazi structures and runs the platform dokurechts. His experience and the repeated threats against him make him an important interview partner for the study. Alexander Roth is a journalist and deputy head of the live desk at the Zeitungsverlag Waiblingen. He investigates right-wing extremism, Reichsbürger movements, and conspiracy ideologies and also reports on the threat assessment for local journalists. Through his own experiences with hostility and threats, he is particularly close to the issue. Anna Hunger is the editor-in-chief of the independent newspaper *Kontext* in Stuttgart. Her work focuses on right-wing populism and right-wing extremism, and for years she has faced legal attacks in the form of SLAPP lawsuits. Interview Partner 4 works as an editor in the central newsroom of the Rhein-Main publishing group, focusing on extremism, security, and justice. During his time as a local journalist, he reported critically on Querdenker protests and was subsequently personally threatened and stalked. To protect his anonymity, his name is not disclosed; instead, the designation Interview Partner 4 is used throughout.

The interviews were conducted between December 2024 and February 2025 using a thematically structured guide focusing on five thematic areas: (1) nature of the threats, (2) changes in the threat situation, (3) handling of threats, (4) role of institutions, and (5) effects on journalistic practice. The analysis followed the principles of qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (cf. MAYRING 2022: 11).

Types of threats

The interviews explore what kinds of experiences journalists reporting on right-wing extremism have with violence or threats (physical or digital), the intensity of these threats, and their psychological impact.

All four respondents report incidents of physical violence and/or physical threats and intimidation attempts, particularly in the context of demonstrations or public events. It repeatedly emerges that the journalists or their colleagues have been deliberately harassed, filmed, or personally confronted during demonstrations. Janzen in particular emphasizes that this is a common practice among neo-Nazis and right-wing groups to hinder reporting. This form of intimidation at demonstrations can be inferred from almost all interviews.

David Janzen: »You really think three times about whether it's too risky and whether you should go alone, which used to be possible. [...] It's become much more obvious. So of course, it's a significant restriction on reporting on-site – it's become more dangerous, and you can't report as carefree as before.«

Direct physical attacks vary in severity. Janzen mentions scuffles at demonstrations, while Roth reports an incident where a colleague standing next to him was punched in the face. Interview Partner 4 describes an incident in which a conspiracy-minded offender aggressively attacked him during a court hearing in October 2023 and later stalked him in his private life. The defendant reportedly rushed toward him shouting that he should »get the hell out.« The perpetrator had allegedly harassed him for years, and this continued even after the court proceedings.

Subtle threats complete the pattern. Hunger notes that while she has not experienced direct physical attacks, she has regularly faced subtle forms of intimidation, such as being followed at public events or being targeted through legal intimidation tactics like SLAPP lawsuits. Such lawsuits are often successful due to a significant »power imbalance between plaintiff and defendant, high claims for damages, or large dispute sums« (Ver.di, n.d.).

In addition to physical violence and threats, the digital sphere plays a central role. Roth and Interview Partner 4 report facing hate and threats on social media. The most frequently used platform for exchange among right-wing actors is Telegram (cf. HEFT 2024), followed by Twitter/X, YouTube, Facebook, Parler, and VKontakte (cf. HEFT 2024). In right-wing Telegram groups, Roth and others are insulted regularly and even subjected to death threats.

Alexander Roth: »Then the threats started appearing in the comments, fantasising about killing people, or names being carved into bullets [...].«

Misuse of personal data is another tactic to intimidate journalists. Interview Partner 4 and Roth report that their names circulate within the right-wing scene to publicly denounce them at demonstrations or online. Interview Partner 4

describes that one perpetrator found out his private address and threatened to »settle things« with him there. He also recounts repeated instances of late-night doorbell ringing at his home.

Interview Partner 4: »He confirmed it – he said he’d settle the score with me, and then he mentioned my private address – that’s where he said he’d do it.«

Janzen’s private address also became known among right-wing extremist actors, apparently leading to numerous attacks at his residence. Although he did not elaborate on this in the interview, other interviews with NDR, the *Braunschweiger Zeitung*, *der rechte rand*, and *taz* draw a clearer picture of the threats. Janzen has been subjected to massive threats from right-wing extremists for years, including death threats. In 2019, neo-Nazis left stickers at his front door with the words »We’ll kill you, Janzen!« (NDR 2023). After the murder of Hessian local politician Walter Lübcke in June 2019, a neo-Nazi publicly threatened on the internet: »Yesterday Walter, tomorrow Janzen« (NICK 2024). During a rally, Janzen was attacked, and the police classified him as a provocateur (BRANDES 2019: 35). In 2020, his family received a rotting pig’s head by mail (cf. NDR 2023); three years later, his house was vandalized with the far-right code »1488,« a candle bearing his name was placed outside, and raw meat was left in his mailbox (NDR 2023; SPEIT 2023). The number 14 in the code refers to »the racist creed from the United States known as the ›Fourteen Words‹: ›We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children« (KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG 2015). The number 88 stands for the eighth letter of the alphabet »H« as an abbreviation for the Nazi salute (cf. KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG 2015). In 2020, Janzen was reportedly harassed by a neo-Nazi while pushing a stroller; the perpetrator threatened to stab him. After Janzen filed charges, he himself was accused of defamation, though the public prosecutor’s office dismissed the case (cf. BEIFUSS 2020).

All interviewees describe the severe psychological strain these threats put on them. Janzen, Roth, and Interview Partner 4 report that they constantly expect hostility in everyday life, while shopping, at events, or in private settings, leading to insecurity, anxiety, and reduced well-being. Janzen states that he no longer reports on certain topics because the threat level has become too high and the stress of attending right-wing demonstrations is unbearable. Such reactions are a major concern for Lutz Kinkel, director of the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (cf. DEUTSCHLANDFUNK.DE 2023a): the threat situation is so severe that many journalists can no longer or no longer wish to report on-site. Security escorts are often too expensive for freelance journalists or even for media outlets (cf. DEUTSCHLANDFUNK.DE 2023a).

Interview Partner 4 emphasizes the deep psychological consequences. For him, the most distressing aspect was not being taken seriously by all relevant authorities, a realization that had long-term psychological effects. He deliberately chose not to specify which institutions he meant.

The intensity of the threats varies among respondents. Janzen and Interview Partner 4 report years of hostility, at times extremely intense. Janzen describes a phase during which he was threatened almost daily for several months. Roth describes the threat situation as a gradual process, with hostilities building up over the years peaking in 2021. Interview Partner 4 recounts that he had been threatened for years before the courtroom escalation. Currently, he is no longer threatened by the offender, likely due to his relocation. Hunger has been dealing with a SLAPP lawsuit since 2018, which also financially endangered her newspaper. The legal battle was extremely time-consuming for her.

Changing of threat situation

The interviews reflect that the threat situation has significantly intensified for journalists reporting on right-wing extremism. Before 2019, direct threats did not occur often, and conflicts at demonstrations were rare.

David Janzen: »In the past, there was hardly any confrontation with the press during demonstrations. Neither I nor others were noticed; things remained relatively calm.«

In general, threats from the right-wing extremist scene were rarely incorporated into media coverage, and right-wing extremism was discussed less in society.

Anna Hunger: »When I started working as a journalist [2007, 2008], there was no thought of »something might happen to you.« [...] Of course, right-wing extremists already existed, but it just wasn't as widespread as it is today – it hadn't yet reached the middle of society like it has now.«

From 2019 onward, the situation worsened, intensified by Pegida [explanation] and the COVID-19 pandemic. Data from Reporters Without Borders show an increasing number of attacks on journalists between 2019 and 2022 (cf. REPORTER OHNE GRENZEN 2024). Right-wing extremist actors became better organized, particularly through the rising use of platforms such as Telegram, where users became increasingly anonymous and radicalized.

Not only the quantity but also the intensity of attacks increased. Scuffles at demonstrations and threats extending into journalists' private lives have become common, supplemented by legal intimidation increasingly used to prevent critical reporting. Although, according to respondents, the threat situation has recently eased slightly, right-wing extremism and hostility toward journalists persist. Janzen points to the ongoing defamation of the press as the »lying press« [Lügenpresse], »a common narrative, especially in right-wing populist and right-wing extremist circles,« as he says. State institutions often respond inadequately; many investigations are dropped, and protective measures are inconsistently implemented, according to interviewees. Hunger notes, however, that

organizations such as the No-SLAPP Alliance have been established to support journalists facing legal attacks.

Overall, there has been a clear deterioration in working conditions for journalists covering right-wing extremism, driven by direct threats, legal intimidation, and the growing societal acceptance of right-wing attitudes (cf. ZICK et al. 2023: 71).

Dealing with threats

The respondents distinguish between individual and collective strategies for coping with threats. All interviewees make threats public. Janzen documents attacks on social media to avoid being pushed into the role of a victim and to generate awareness. At the same time, he is considering relocating but emphasizes that everyone must handle such situations individually. After being threatened during the court hearing in October 2023, Interview Partner 4 decided to report the events in detail, even though he was aware that the perpetrator might subsequently obtain his private address. Roth gives talks about the attacks and no longer attends demonstrations alone. Hunger refuses interviews with right-wing extremists to avoid giving them a platform, a rule that applies to her entire editorial team.

Networking is seen as the central collective strategy, providing both security and psychological relief.

Alexander Roth: »In general, I think it's psychologically important to know that you're not alone – that there are others who experience similar things. You can talk about it, and sometimes it's simply about being able to tell someone who understands [...]. It's a different kind of conversation [...] when you're talking to someone who's been through it, too. And for that, it's important [...] to practice a bit of mental hygiene.«

Hunger emphasizes that in this particular field, strong professional networking transcends the usual competition between newsrooms. She considers cooperation with other journalists within an ›anti-threat network‹ to be helpful and positive. Within her own newsroom, mutual support is also common. At demonstrations, journalists deliberately seek contact with colleagues. Reader donations, legal aid funds, or offered security escorts offer additional support (cf. REPORTER OHNE GRENZEN 2023: 10).

Three respondents also stress the societal dimension. Janzen sees the media as the ›fourth estate‹ and calls for closer cooperation between press associations, police, and the judiciary. He cites *Correctiv* as an example of public-interest journalism. Roth calls for greater political attention, and Interview Partner 4 wishes for increased awareness of the issue within newsrooms, associations, and authorities.

In summary, individual strategies focus primarily on self-protection, while collective strategies aim at solidarity, awareness-raising, and structural improvements.

The role of institutions

Institutions play a central role in protecting journalists. Almost all respondents report experiences with the police in connection with threats. A common criticism is the lack of police presence or intervention during demonstrations.

David Janzen: »I've repeatedly experienced verbal threats coming from within demonstrations, but the police didn't notice. Even when you address them, they say, »I didn't hear that; come to the station tomorrow and file a complaint« – which is, of course, futile.«

Roth describes a situation where he was threatened for a prolonged period after a demonstration despite police presence.

Alexander Roth: »There are always a few situations that become tense [...], where the police simply refuse to maintain a presence on the ground.«

At the same time, he stresses the importance of preventive contact and points to the value of having designated police contact persons. Interview Partner 4 reports positive experiences, saying that he felt taken seriously during the threats, though he adds that this only applied to his regional police force. While Janzen and Roth remain critical overall, Interview Partner 4 perceives an existing awareness within the police for the risks faced by journalists, though usually only as part of routine duties.

These assessments align with reports from Reporters Without Borders documenting insufficient protection at demonstrations (cf. REPORTER OHNE GRENZEN 2020: 5, 2021: 5, 2022: 5, 2023: , 2024b: 11, 2025: 10). In 2024, the police were reportedly absent in 25 out of 41 cases and failed to intervene in four additional cases despite being requested to do so (cf. REPORTER OHNE GRENZEN 2024: 11). In some instances, there were even assaults on media professionals by police officers themselves (cf. REPORTER OHNE GRENZEN 2024: 11). As early as 2021, German newspaper *taz* criticized inadequate knowledge of press freedom and an outdated code of conduct between police and media (FROMM/ULRICH 2021; INNENMINISTERKONFERENZ 1993: 1). The German Press Council therefore published a draft for updated rules in 2020, but its implementation is still pending (DER DEUTSCHE PRESSERAT 2020: 1, 2021).

All respondents also report negative experiences with the judiciary. Janzen and Roth criticize lengthy processing times, frequent case dismissals, and a lack of consequences, even for known perpetrators. Roth attributes this to overburdened courts but nonetheless calls for stronger judicial prosecution, as attacks on journalists differ in motivation from those on private individuals – they represent a targeted attack on press freedom. Hunger, as mentioned, reports abusive SLAPP lawsuits. In contrast, Interview Partner 4 describes his case as being taken seriously: the perpetrator was sentenced to three months in prison without parole.

Organizations and associations are generally viewed positively. Janzen and Interview Partner 4 see the main problem not in state restrictions but in broader

societal developments. Janzen refers to support from international organizations and press associations. Hunger cites the No-SLAPP Alliance (NOSLAPP.DE 2024), which includes, among others, the transparency portal *FragDenStaat*; she also mentions the association Netzwerk Recherche. Reporters Without Borders mainly supports small media outlets and freelance journalists (cf. REPORTER OHNE GRENZEN 2025a). A new EU directive is intended to better protect journalists from SLAPP lawsuits in the future (BUNDESRECHTSANWALTSKAMMER 2024). Among other things, it provides for the early dismissal of unfounded claims, the obligation for plaintiffs to provide evidence, and compensation for affected parties. EU member states are required to transpose the directive into national law by May 2026 and to provide support services for affected individuals by then (REPORTER OHNE GRENZEN 2025a: 4).

Overall, institutions emerge as a key issue for all respondents. While organizations are generally perceived as helpful supporters, experiences with the police and judiciary are mixed. The police are seen on the one hand as overburdened or insufficiently active, and on the other as valuable points of contact. The judiciary is perceived as too slow and ineffective by some, yet others commend it for consistent rulings.

Effects on journalistic practice

The following section outlines how journalistic practice has changed due to the increasing threats and attacks on journalists, and which strategies the interviewed journalists have developed in order to continue their reporting.

Security measures

For the respondents, the protection of personal data plays a central role. Janzen and Interview Partner 4 had their addresses blocked in the registration database to make their places of residence inaccessible. Interview Partner 4 has consistently maintained this security measure and immediately renewed it after relocating. Roth is very cautious with personal information on the internet and often has private deliveries sent to the editorial office. Janzen publishes sensitive investigations partially anonymously or refrains from publication entirely when the risk is too high. Hunger reports that her editorial team has all texts legally reviewed prior to publication in order to prevent attacks.

All interviewees have also adjusted their work methods during on-site reporting, particularly at demonstrations, emphasizing that they have become more cautious.

David Janzen: »Of course, one naturally becomes more cautious.«

Alexander Roth: »I'm definitely more cautious.«

Anna Hunger: »You look more closely, you research more carefully, I think.«

Interview Partner 4: »I'm generally more cautious.«

Janzen rarely attends rallies anymore, if he does go, he makes sure he is not alone, and leaves events early. Roth takes similar precautions and reports that some colleagues now hire security personnel. At the *Kontext* editorial office, there are clear guidelines stipulating that younger colleagues may only attend demonstrations when accompanied. The newsroom also deliberately refrains from interviewing AfD politicians. Several reports confirm that the AfD systematically excludes critical media and thereby restricts press freedom (cf. MEDIA FREEDOM RAPID RESPONSE 2024: 30ff.).

An example of this occurred at the AfD Bavaria party conference in November 2024, where BR reporter Johannes Reichart was accompanied by security personnel at every step, even on his way to the restroom. He later described this as a »new dimension of the restriction of press freedom« (JOSWIG 2024), since he had also been forbidden from speaking with party members. According to article 6 §27(2) of the Assembly Act (Versammlungsgesetz), press representatives may not be excluded from public assemblies if they can identify themselves with a press card.

Self-censorship

Self-censorship is likely the most severe consequence of the threats journalists are facing. The respondents understand this as the avoidance of certain topics or the modification of their reporting out of fear of repercussions.

Janzen, Roth, Hunger, and Interview Partner 4 all emphasize that they have not fundamentally changed their choice of topics but have taken selective precautions: Janzen refrains from investigations related to biker or criminal structures and publishes some sensitive pieces anonymously; Hunger points to legal disputes that restrict her reporting; and Interview Partner 4 describes maintaining his approach to topics, though acknowledging it was an psychologically intensive process to do so.

Roth also reports that colleagues have reduced their work or stopped reporting altogether out of fear, actively limiting press freedom. In addition, economic factors – such as the threat of subscription cancellations – can influence editorial decisions.

Overall, all respondents reject self-censorship for themselves personally but are aware of the risks and try to complement their work with security measures.

Alexander Roth: »I continue as before. The criteria for why and how we report are not tied to threats, but to relevance. So conversely, I also don't report on people threatening me every week, as a kind of retaliation [...], but the question simply is: is this relevant to the public, and is what I am writing true?«

Their experiences show that threats can lead not only to individual constraints but also to structural consequences for press freedom. According to the agenda-setting approach, topics avoided out of fear may gradually disappear from public discourse (cf. LÖFFELHOLZ/ROTHENBERGER 2015: 419). This increases the risk that the propensity for violence among right-wing extremists will not be adequately reported (cf. LÖFFELHOLZ/ROTHENBERGER 2015: 428).

Conclusion

This study makes it clear that right-wing extremist threats in Germany not only affect journalists individually but also have structural implications for journalistic practice and freedom of the press. The qualitative analysis of the interviews reveals a wide range of threats, from subtle intimidation and digital hate campaigns to physical assaults. This leads to psychological strain, increased caution, and, in some cases, self-censorship among those affected.

The interviewed journalists have developed both individual and collective strategies to continue their work despite the threats. Personal protection measures, such as securing private data, adapting research methods, and exercising deliberate caution on site, ensure direct safety. Networking, solidarity within editorial teams, and support from organizations play a central role in coping with threats.

At the same time, experiences with police and judiciary demonstrate that protection provided by the institutions is often insufficient, while associations and civil society initiatives provide important support.

The effects on journalistic practice are profound. The constant threat leads to changes in topic selection, limitations in research, and increased use of digital security measures. Although direct self-censorship is largely rejected by the interviewees, it becomes evident that fear as well as risk assessment significantly influence journalistic work. In the medium and long term, this could result in the disappearance of socially relevant topics from public discourse, thereby endangering press freedom and democratic public life.

The findings underscore the need for targeted protection measures, institutional support, and heightened societal awareness. Only a combination of individual caution, collective networks, and proactive political and institutional action can sustainably secure the work of journalists reporting on right-wing extremism and strengthen press freedom.

This concerns both targeted protection measures for media professionals and the raising of public awareness of the issue. The present study contributes to the academic discussion of the threat situation faced by journalists in Germany and calls for the development of solutions to protect press freedom.

About the author

Olivia Mangold earned her Bachelor's degree in Media Studies and Sociology at the University of Tübingen. The article is based on her bachelor's thesis. She is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Media Studies with a focus on Media Economics and Media Management at the University of Cologne.

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Focus: Press Freedom and Right-Wing Extremism

Michael Krell / Klemens Köhler / Tom Böhme

»It determined my everyday life, it makes you just afraid.«

A socio-spatial investigation into the effects of freelance and local journalism on the far right in East Germany

Abstract: The emergence of the far right in Germany has resulted in an elevated risk for the safety of journalists covering this beat. Attacks on the press have escalated considerably since the rise of large-scale anti-asylum protests, such as PEGIDA, particularly in East Germany (cf. ECPMF 2017). Despite the fact that the media has repeatedly expressed dismay at the severity of violence against the press by far-right groups, there has been little academic discussion of this phenomenon to date. This article addresses this research gap by examining the impact of the far right on journalistic work and the professional and everyday lives of journalists. The main finding of this study is that freelance and local journalists, who are typically positioned at the ›front line‹ of reporting, are exposed to a diverse array of threats from the far right. Utilizing the spatial concept of performative and affective territorialization, hostility towards the press is analyzed in terms of its function as a spatialized form of far-right power seeking. The findings reveal the existential threat posed by hostility towards the press at the individual level to journalists and thus to press freedom as a whole.

Keywords: Far right, freedom of the press, hostility towards the press, threats, territorialization

»But most of the time it's just threats or a bit of chasing after me. Or people pointing at me and then starting to make phone calls, so that I realize that reinforcements are probably being called and I have to leave the place« (I1_Z25, translated by the authors).

According to Reporters Without Borders (2025), press freedom is under pressure globally, including in Germany: Physical attacks on journalists roughly doubled in the last available reporting year, 2024, compared to the previous year. Emphasis is placed on demonstrations as crime scenes, with attacks perpetrated by individuals affiliated with the far right constituting a substantial proportion of the total number of attacks (cf. *ibid.*: 4). This trend constitutes a development that has been observed since the rise and normalization of far-right movements and parties, which started approximately in 2014 (cf. KÖHLER 2024: 287f.). A particular focus has been placed on far-right mass mobilizations and ongoing mobilizations in East Germany, such as PEGIDA and the so-called Monday protests that emerged during the coronavirus pandemic. These mobilizations have become known as hotspots of anti-press violence (cf. ECPMF 2023). Journalists who work as freelancers or local journalists without the financial support of a major editorial office or large team are particularly affected by these attacks. However, these journalists are often the ones who assume the most dangerous reporting assignments, which take place far away from the major events that receive the most public attention (cf. ÖRNEBRING/SCHMITZ-WEISS 2021: 1898f.; ECPMF 2023: 29ff.).

Despite the intensification of attacks on press freedom by the far right in Germany over the past decade, academic research into this issue remains in its infancy. In the English-speaking world, there are a number of studies that address issues of threats against journalists in the context of various protests and their effects (cf. MILLER 2023; POST/KEPPLINGER 2019; NILSSON/ÖRNEBRING 2016), threats and harassment against women journalists on the internet (cf. STAHEL/SCHOEN 2020; POSETTI/SHABIR 2022; CHEN et al. 2018), or questions of press freedom in the context of international armed conflicts (cf. Waisbord 2022; Chinweobo-Onuoha 2022). In the context of German-language studies, extant literature is considerably more fragmented. Research in this field has focused on the far-right narrative of the »Lügenpresse« (engl.: lying press) (cf. KOLISKA/ASSMANN 2021; Gadinger 2018) or the fairness of reporting on far-right movements and parties (cf. SCHELLENBERG 2016). Furthermore, there are individual quantitative studies that attempt to capture the current state of hostility toward the press in a representative manner (cf. REES 2023; PREUSS et al. 2017). However, with a few exceptions (cf. KÖHLER 2024; KRELL et al. 2025), there is a dearth of studies that are locally informed and qualitatively oriented. Such studies would focus on the concrete practices of hostility towards the press, how it is dealt with, and its impact. This is the context in which the present article is situated. A series of qualitative interviews with affected freelance and local journalists were conducted to ascertain how media professionals in East Germany who work on the far right experience their professional practices and the challenges and consequences these entail. The analytical focus is on the local context of the complex

relationship between press freedom and the far right. The analysis of far-right hostility as spatially mediated attempts at power utilizes the spatial theory approach of territorialization (cf. *AUTOR*INNENKOLLEKTIV TERRA-R* 2025). This article contributes to the existing body of knowledge by offering a novel perspective on a relatively understudied aspect of the subject. In addressing the current state of tension between the far right and press freedom, this study first situates journalism and press freedom in terms of media theory and discusses hostility toward the press as a far-right practice. The study then introduces the spatial theory approach and the methodology used. The results of the study offer an analysis of the impact on journalistic work by the far right in three dimensions. These dimensions are then discussed.

Journalistic Work on the Far Right and Freedom of the Press

Theoretical Approaches to Journalism and Freedom of the Press

In contemporary democratic societies, characterized by anonymity, mass media serve the function of establishing a shared space for public discourse (cf. *NORTH et al.* 2009). The construction of media reality constitutes the frame of reference where public negotiation processes unfold. Journalistic media, through their selection of topics and content, based on novelty, factuality, and relevance (cf. *MEIER* 2011: 13), have a special role in reflecting current political processes and thus enabling participation.

Journalists are granted privileged access to experts and members of social elites through formal or informal institutions. This privilege is closely linked to compliance with codes of conduct, such as the press code, and to the selection of topics according to the aforementioned criteria. Furthermore, the dissemination of specialized knowledge through their publications enables non-specialists to partake in professional discourses, extending beyond the political domain. In the context of local journalism, which has evolved from being defined by municipal boundaries to encompassing multiple municipalities or even entire districts, reporting from the public sphere facilitates engagement in the events transpiring within these domains. This encompasses a wide range of activities, including the opening of new stores, administrative decisions, and events that influence public opinion, such as rallies. Consequently, journalistic media empower consumers to construct an understanding of these events and engage in the formation of public opinion. The aforementioned entities fulfill their function as a pillar of democratic opinion-forming, particularly when they publish reports of abuses and misconduct by state and public actors.

In Germany, the freedom of the press as a right (and the freedom of broadcasting as a right), are guaranteed by Article 5 of the Basic Law (»Grundgesetz«). On the one hand, these rights are protected by the absence of state regulation. This conception of »negative« freedom of the press suggests that the occupation of »journalist« is characterized by its liberal nature, with no specific entry requirements to the profession, including no state or public examination imposing restrictions on individuals seeking to work in this profession. On the other hand, censorship is strictly prohibited, and state authorities are obligated to ensure that all journalists have unobstructed access to information without exception. Consequently, the state has established measures to safeguard the diversity and autonomy of journalistic reporting. This phenomenon functions as a counter-agent to centralized or controlled opinion-formation, thereby impeding the accumulation of power. Conversely, the concept of a »positive freedom of the press« stipulates that the state is obligated to ensure the operational capacity of journalists in instances when non-state actors impede their professional activities. In certain instances, this directive is enforced by security agencies through the use of force. This ensures that even a concentration of power or resources will not result in the suppression of press freedom.

The freedom of the press empowers journalistic media to subject state and publicly influential actors to public scrutiny and debate. Consequently, it is not only an integral component of democratic systems, but also a corrective mechanism to mitigate the abuse of power. The annual monitoring reports on the state of press freedom in Germany identify four main threats to press freedom. These threats, identified by all of the reports, include the expansion of state surveillance, SLAPP¹ lawsuits, economic pressure and concentration in the media market, and violence against media professionals and editorial offices (cf. ECPMF 2024; REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS 2025). In recent years, reports have repeatedly identified violence at demonstrations as the most significant threat to individual journalists, with anti-press violence being a recurring element of far-right gatherings (cf. *ibid.*).

Hostility towards the Press and the Far Right

Far-right ideologies invariably entail the abuse of power and the use of violent coercion to enforce conformity. This alone gives rise to an interest in the suppression of an autonomous public sphere and independent media outlets. This phenomenon transpires across multiple domains. Primarily, it is embedded within the framework of a despised democratic system – a system that, according to

1 Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation (SLAPP) are lawsuits brought by individuals and entities to dissuade critics from continuing to produce negative publicity and do not have any true legal claims against critics.

Nazi ideology, was purportedly a Jewish conspiracy to impede the exercise of power. The »Jewish press« is a component of an enemy image that must be eradicated (cf. KÖHLER 2024: 296).

From a strategic perspective, a press that fulfills its control function acts as an antagonist to far-right narratives. The use of violence against a regime that is believed to be oppressive cannot be justified if it is kept in check by a small number of journalists. Of particular concern is the potential for countermeasures by civil society or, if necessary, criminal prosecution, if reporting focuses on far-right activities and is subsequently debated in public. The violent obstruction of the press and the denigration of media entities as »state media« or »system media« can therefore also pursue immediate goals based on the considerations described above (cf. *ibid.*). The delegitimization of journalistic media serves two primary functions: it prepares the ground for attacks, and it creates a divide between an author's supporters and the broader public sphere of democratic discourse. For years, endeavors have been undertaken to establish a »counter-public sphere,« characterized by its distinct frame of reference and devoid of discursive exchange with democratic society (cf. SCHWARZ 2020: 103ff.). The weakening of the pillars of a shared media reality has been demonstrated to hinder democratic negotiation processes. The crisis of democratic institutions thus created or claimed then serves as an argument for their abolition.

Territorialization as a Socio-Spatial Approach analyzing the Far Right

The actions, strategies, and successes of far-right actors invariably involve spatial dimensions, as contemporary far-right entities function »through and within political geographies« (STREULE et al. 2025: 29, translation by the authors). These actors produce spaces through a variety of means, including the marking of walls with graffiti, the affixing of stickers to streetlights, the proclamation of a national liberated zone (»National befreite Zone«), or the planning of mass deportations. In this manner, spaces are imbued with significance and exert an influence on other segments of society – for instance, victims of far-right violence – who perceive the markings on spaces as symbolic exclusion and threats of violence (cf. MIGGELBRINK/MULLIS 2022: 29). The use of physical violence as a means of communication is inherent to the far right. This ideological tendency employs a categorization of physical characteristics that serves as the foundation for the devaluation, exclusion, and destruction of those deemed to be »marked« by these characteristics. This process is characterized by a logic of devaluation, exclusion, and destruction, as previously outlined (*ibid.*). These markings and exclusions are experienced through local everyday practices that are inextricably interwoven with the spaces in which they take place. A fundamental aspect of

these assumptions is the acknowledgment of space as a contested and contradictory outcome of social practices (cf. LEFEBVRE 1991; HARVEY 1973), which in turn exerts influence on those very social practices (cf. MASSEY 1994). Space and society are thus in a constant process of mutual co-production. Consequently, spaces are not static entities; rather, they are akin to societies in that they are fragile and contested. Within these communities, »different social projects always exist at the same time, characterized by different forms of spatialization« (BRAUN et al. 2025: 20, translated by the authors). It is therefore evident that spaces represent a formidable resource, over which various social and political actors engage in contentious struggles. A spatial approach is therefore fruitful for analyzing the far right, as it allows these hegemonic aspirations to be recognized and evaluated in terms of their concrete successes that can be experienced locally. This emphasis on the quotidian experience as perceived through a spatial lens presents a valuable opportunity to examine the practices of geography-making. Consequently, the substantial social analyses that are prevalent in research on the far right can be augmented by meticulous observations of local circumstances (cf. MULLIS/MIGGELBRINK 2021: 190).

The conceptual underpinnings of this assertion are rooted in the notion of territorialization (cf. AUTOR*INNENKOLLEKTIV TERRA-R 2025). This concept emphasizes forms of spatial action that are marked by the acquisition of sovereignty over specific spaces. Territorialization »situates practices at the core of the analytical framework, thereby engendering spaces that are perceived as either one's own or foreign, heterogeneous or homogeneous, progressive or regressive, and experienced by diverse individuals or groups as either empowering or alienating, inclusive or exclusionary, and communitarian or violent« (STREULE et al. 2025: 30, translation by the authors). The territorialization process is characterized by the endeavor to wield control over a particular space through the implementation of specific practices (cf. BELINA 2017: 88). This characteristic renders it a suitable subject for analysis of political actors, such as the far right. The analytical strength of the concept of territorialization lies in considering not only practices on the part of the far right, but also those relating to it.

The concept of territorialization *by* the far right encompasses the process of appropriation, design, control, or coding of spaces (STREULE et al. 2025: 41). In the context of discursive or affective ideas of spaces associated with the far right, territorialization may involve the use of undifferentiated language, such as the term »Brown East,« (»Brauner Osten«) to refer to a space considered to be far right (cf. AUTOR*INNENKOLLEKTIV TERRA-R 2024). For instance, the latter would entail the undifferentiated discourse on the »Brown East« as a far-right space. On the one hand, the term facilitates the analysis of far-right attempts to exercise control over specific spaces. On the other hand, it underscores the repercussions of these practices on other segments of society. This approach enables a multi-layered and

power-sensitive analysis of socio-spatial practices *by* and *of* the far right, with a focus on the everyday production of spaces (cf. STREULE et al. 2025: 45f.).

The concept of territorialization is differentiated through various dimensions, thus enabling a more precise analysis of the subject matter. The performative and affective dimensions are pertinent to the subject matter of this article. The concept of performative territorialization, based on Butler's perception of performativity (2018), grounds an analysis that encompasses both linguistic and physical practices. These practices, as delineated by Butler, seek to assert and wield authority over specific spatial domains. This perspective is further elaborated upon by Krell et al. (2025), who provide a comprehensive overview of the theoretical framework and its implications. This conceptual framework elucidates the tangible actions of far-right actors and their physically mediated effects on other individuals and groups. Conversely, affective territorialization processes prioritize an examination of the emotional underpinnings of territorialization practices (cf. HUTTA/KÜBLER 2025). This approach enables the examination of the significance of emotions and atmospheres in the actions and impact of far-right actors. Additionally, this approach facilitates the analysis of how emotional dynamics influence »the agency of the actors involved« (ibid.: 82, translation by the authors). Consequently, it is feasible to examine the impact of affective dynamics on the processes of spatial appropriation by diverse individuals and groups (cf. ibid.). Utilizing this theoretical framework, the subsequent sections of the study examine the actions and impact of the far right on journalists.

Methodological Approach

To answer the research question, three qualitative interviews (60-90 min) were conducted with freelance and local journalists in East Germany. The methodological incentive was to uncover the interviewees' knowledge about their individual experiences regarding the impact of reporting on the far right on their journalistic practices and daily life. Based on this endeavor, problem-centered interviews were conducted using a guide to ensure both a certain degree of openness and standardization in data generation (cf. HELFFERICH 2022: 875). The qualitative design makes it possible to generate detailed and open narrative passages to reveal in detail the background and contexts in which journalists experience the effects of hostility towards the press. The aim is to identify patterns to analyze them in a theory-building manner. The methodological design focuses on exploration, foregoing the quantitative claim of representativeness.

A qualitative content analysis based on Mayring (2014) was used to analyze the generated data. With the help of this method, the data was systematically organized using MAXQDA software, and evaluated using a category system that was

partly deductive and partly inductive. In accordance with the qualitative content analysis procedure, the data was first structured by developing individual categories in a multi-stage coding process and assigning anchor examples and rules to them. These were then tested on further material (cf. RÄDIKER/KUCKARTZ 2019). In the first coding round, three super categories were formed inductively, clustering the impact of covering the far right on journalistic practice according to the areas of work experience, everyday life, and the online sphere, each of which is assigned several subcategories. In the second coding round, the interview material was searched for points of reference to performative and affective territorializations using deductive category formation, which represent the second, analytical-interpretative level of the results as patterns of spatialized modes of power.

Findings: Journalistic Coverage of the Far Right Impacting all Areas of Life

The content analysis of the interviews shows the various effects that journalistic work on the far right has on freelance and local journalists. In the following, these are clustered according to three dimensions: work experience, everyday life, and the online sphere (see Fig. 1).

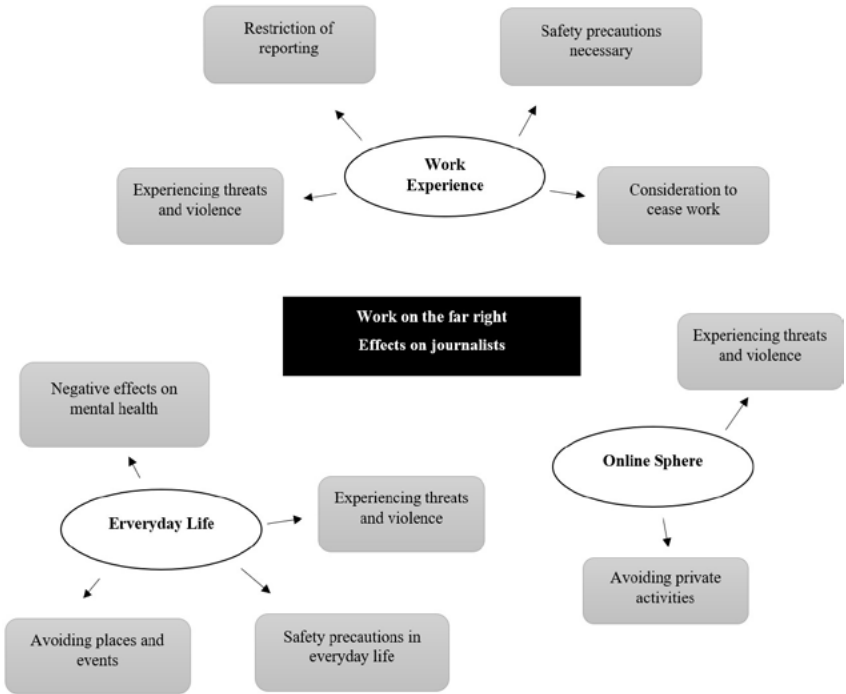
Work Experience

»During sensitive shoots, we actually worked with our own drivers, who tracked our live location the whole time and then basically jumped in as soon as things got dicey, which we had to resort to because we were being chased by Neo-Nazis [...].« (I3_Z39, translated by the authors)

For journalists, working to cover the far right always involves a comprehensive effort to adapt to the particularities and dangers of the subject of their reporting. Due to the violence inherent in the far right, combined with the virulent hostility toward the press in far-right circles, the danger of becoming a victim of insults, threats, and attempted or actual violence is always present. This influences the possibilities for journalistic work on the subject negatively in a variety of ways (cf. REES 2023: 369).

Fig.1

Work on the far right: effects on journalists



Coded Clusters

In particularly when covering the far right in concrete situations, for example at demonstrations, events, in courtrooms, or during (confrontational) interviews, journalists regularly experience forms of threat and violence:

»So basically, there are all kinds of obstructions or even attacks on me. We have the typical obstruction of press work, such as covering cameras and standing in the way. We have threats, verbal abuse, attempted physical attacks, then also actual physical attacks, being chased, having objects thrown at us.« (I1_Z21, translated by the authors).

In addition, there are clandestine threats and attacks against journalists, for example when they are placed on enemy lists of militant far-right organizations (I2_Z25) or when their car tires are destroyed (I2_Z29).

However, these forms of hostility towards the press, which can lead to physical violence and even death, are at the end of a spiral of escalation that can be observed, for example, in far-right protests. Before that, more subtle forms of intimidation usually take place, which already make it clear to journalists that

they are not welcome and aim to make their work as unpleasant as possible (cf. KRELL et al. 2025). These more subtle forms of hostility towards the press include labeling reporters as enemies, for example when speakers at far-right demonstrations explicitly warn those present about journalists, sometimes mentioning reporters' full names:

»At that time, when I was still working under a pseudonym, my name, my full name, was shouted at demonstrations by participants during far-right demonstrations [...].« (I3_Z19, translated by the authors).

Far-right demonstrations in front of editorial offices can also be classified as a form of intimidation (I2_Z11).

The interviewees' accounts reveal the normality and regularity of this violent state of threat, with one interviewee, who had had only a few years of professional experience, saying:

»I have experienced dozens, probably around a hundred, physical assaults in my entire career« (I3_Z35, translated by the authors).

On the other hand, habituation effects can be observed. The violence experienced becomes a normalized part of the job:

»Threats or attacks used to affect me somehow, but now, yes, it's everyday life« (I1_Z90, translated by the authors).

The effects of this constant threat to which journalists who cover the far right are exposed to have consequences at both the individual and structural level. A key consequence is a narrowing scope regarding how the far right is being reported on, which is a direct or indirect result of the threats and violence. The continuous construction of enemy stereotypes makes it impossible to use certain forms of journalistic work:

»Yes, but the bad thing is that everyone knows you, and then you're framed, and then you don't get anything anymore. So as a journalist, I'm burned, and that's just stupid. I can't go there and ask anyone anything. I won't get any answers.« (I2_13, translated by the authors).

Conducting interviews with far-right actors to collect quotes is made impossible by the fact that they treat journalists as enemies in the context of the »lying press« narrative (cf. KOLISKA/ASSMANN 2021). In addition, the violence experienced has an intimidating effect, so that journalists consciously avoid events of the far right that are perceived as particularly dangerous, even though they consider them newsworthy (I1_Z13). Even during reporting, certain situations are avoided, meaning that journalists have to put their own standards for journalistic work on hold:

»[...] I have also allowed myself to be intimidated to a certain extent and no longer pursue my profession as consistently in certain situations or when taking certain pictures, but instead tend to say, »I'm going to take a step back.«« (I3_Z19, translated by the authors).

Another necessity arising from the existing threats is the constant consideration of security issues and the implementation of security measures to enable

reporting on the far right. These range from editorial guidelines requiring at least two people to report on protests (I2_Z63), the use of commercial and volunteer bodyguards, to carrying pepper spray (I1_102; I1_142), the use of GPS tracking and getaway drivers (see introductory quote), taking detours after reporting, to the necessity of precise coordination with the police or working under a pseudonym (I3_25; I1_Z150; I3_Z19). More unusual strategies, such as meticulously planning one's own clothing, are also part of these adaptation strategies:

»[I have] thought about [...] how I dress, that I only wear a certain outfit at demonstrations to avoid being recognized in private« (I3_Z37, translated by the authors).

What these strategies have in common is their negative impact on the ability to work independently and freely as a journalist, as a lot of resources have to be invested in security measures. At the same time, security measures can undermine journalistic standards if, while protecting journalists, they make specific aspects of their work impossible. This can be observed in the use of bodyguards, which makes it more difficult to engage in conversation with actors of the far right or puts journalists in the spotlight of violent actors (I2_Z33). The resulting trade-off between security and the possibility of free reporting is perceived as a burden by journalists working on the far right (I2_33) and thus has a restrictive effect on the degree of press freedom.

Ultimately, the high level of threat leads journalists to consider stopping their work on the subject, doing so temporarily or completely, or turning to less dangerous and psychologically stressful fields of journalism:

»So they actually had this success, in the sense that I was too afraid for myself and my family (...) and didn't want to take the risk anymore.« (I2_Z19, translated by the authors).

These restrictions on reporting due to the security situation pose a significant problem for press freedom, as blind spots arise in societal perception when it is no longer safe to report on certain events.

Everyday Life

»I hardly ever leave my apartment anymore, simply for safety reasons. I only leave the apartment when I have appointments, or when I go grocery shopping or to report on something, for example, and when I take out the trash, I don't just do it for the sake of it, but only when I have to go out anyway, because every additional trip outside carries too great a risk that I might accidentally run into a Nazi.« (I1_Z138, translated by the authors)

Journalistic work on the far right does not end when the last recording has been made or the last word has been written. Instead, this type of work is often characterized by the constant danger of being affected by the negative consequences of this work in one's private life. This is especially true for journalists who report on public far-right events, such as demonstrations, and can be recognized as a result. There is a risk that far-right activists will target individual

journalists who regularly report on their protests and attempt to intimidate them and thus prevent them from doing their work. For example, this became increasingly apparent during the coronavirus pandemic, when far-right protesters launched a campaign

»calling on people to flood me with legal complaints, with fake legal complaints – in quotation marks – in order to get hold of my personal data« (I3_Z19).

In the case investigated, the call spread via social media led to the police investigating the journalist, who was working under a pseudonym. As a result, the plaintiffs from the far-right spectrum obtained his real name through their right to inspect files, even though all preliminary investigations were dropped (I3_Z19).

Once the names, faces, or addresses of journalists are known, there is always the risk of being recognized and threatened in everyday life or, in the worst case, becoming the victim of violent attacks. In the cases examined, various forms of threats in private life were reported, including being recognized, insulted, threatened, and harassed while shopping (I1_Z25; I2_Z37) or being followed and physically attacked on the way home (I1_Z25). There is a risk of being recognized and threatened in almost every place in everyday life:

»One incident that has remained particularly vivid in my mind is when I was once [...] recognized in the city center by someone [...] who was wearing typical far-right clothing [...] and stared at me for a long time and then basically gestured toward me as if to cut off my head. He was a man in his early to mid-40s, and I was 18 or so [...] This doesn't leave you unaffected« (I3_Z23, translated by the authors).

In addition to spontaneous forms of threats and violence, such forms of hostility toward the press range from planned, clandestine attacks to attacks on journalists' private addresses, for example:

»Back then, I was threatened at my parents' home, where our front door and mailboxes were covered with [...] far-right stickers. [...] I know colleagues who had a cobblestone thrown through their window« (I3_Z19, translated by the authors).

Journalists experience such everyday attacks as traumatic events, as they demonstrate with all their intensity that their private sphere is exposed to a constant threat. It is precisely there that far-right attacks are particularly effective, as they usually catch journalists unprepared and affect people in their immediate social environment, which can lead to severe psychological stress and feelings of constant fear:

»I don't know if you can imagine what it's like when, in a cloak-and-dagger operation, far-right stickers are stuck on your front door. Of course, that intimidates you and causes fear. And in my case, it also led to me completely stopping my work on the far right for a good nine months [...] after this incident« (I3_Z19, translated by the authors).

Those affected find concern for their own social environment particularly stressful:

»It also always means [...] I was out with my girlfriend at the time, it always has an impact on your loved ones. You often worry a lot about them.« (I3_Z23, translated by the authors).

Experiencing threats and violence can severely restrict the quality of life of the journalists affected, as they live in a state of constant fear of the next moment when they will be recognized and threatened:

»Especially at that time, when [...] I was also a major bogeyman in the local far-right scene here, and that really affects you, how you move around, how you travel by train, how often you look over your shoulder on your way home. That was very intense for a while, so it really determined my everyday life, because you're just afraid, you have to say« (I3_Z25, translated by the authors).

Those affected report psychological stress and sleepless nights (I1_Z104). In order to increase their own sense of security and continue to participate in everyday life, affected journalists take various security measures: Some only leave the house with means of self-defense, inform people in their circle before leaving their home, learn self-defense methods, or take great care to always have enough battery power on their cell phone to be able to call for help in case of an emergency (I3_Z37; I1_Z138; I3_Z37; I1_146). In extreme cases, this fear leads to a complete withdrawal from public life: Everyday places such as supermarkets are avoided and people only leave their homes when absolutely necessary, as the introductory quote shows. In this extreme case, journalistic activity to cover the far right is such a burden due to the constant threat it entails that a normal life is no longer possible. Regardless of the individual case, the impact on the everyday lives of those affected shows the intensity with which the far right acts against its opponents and how effective this approach is in making unfavorable reporting about them more difficult or even impossible.

Online Sphere

»I also had a Nazi stalker for a while. He published song lyrics on the internet about how he was going to kill me and dispose of my body.« (I1_Z31, translated by the authors)

In addition to the physical and material effects in the sphere of work and everyday life, the online world cuts across both dimensions. There, work and everyday life are blurred when, for example, professional social media profiles are still present on mobile devices after work. The online sphere is becoming increasingly important in far-right threats against journalists, with women being disproportionately affected (cf. STAHEL 2023; POSETTI/SHABBIR 2022). Our study also shows that journalists in East Germany are affected by various forms of online threats. Hate messages and death threats against public journalistic profiles via social media or email are widespread (I1_Z27). In addition, there are more complex forms of intimidation, such as online doxing campaigns, in which far-right actors attempt to obtain journalists' personal data through public

appeals. At a further stage of escalation, collected private data are used to specifically intimidate journalists:

»It has also happened that there were articles published about me from far-right individuals [...] that focused only on a colleague and me, for example, where my name was mentioned, photos, and other information where mentioned with subtle threats, like our personal addresses are known and so on« (I3_Z27, translated by the authors).

In extreme cases, these threats escalate to stalking or public calls for serious acts of violence (see introductory quote):

»Then he asked around on the internet for people to help him stab me, so that other people would hold me down and he could stab me« (I1_Z31, translated by the authors).

For those affected, these forms of threat are a heavy burden. One reason for this is that threats and violence in the online sphere are not hermetically separated from the physical world, but are hybrid and intertwined with it (cf. KRELL et al. 2025). In the case of the stalker, for example, he sprayed graffiti containing a death threat near the journalist's home (I1_Z31). At the same time, online threats lead to private activities on the internet being discontinued because the risk of being recognized there by far-right individuals is considered too high:

»A private account, [...] like many people have, [...] on social networks simply under my name, where I share personal experiences, I can't imagine doing that because [...] it could allow conclusions to be drawn about my place of residence, my social environment, or simply because some minor detail could give them a point of attack, which could then manifest itself in further threats or doxing situations against me« (I3_Z33, translated by the authors).

This means that journalistic coverage of the far right also comes with restrictions online and requires constant precautions to avoid becoming a victim of threats and violence.

Discussion: Far-Right Hostility towards the Press

Our empirical findings make it clear that journalistic work on the far right is accompanied by a diverse range of threats that can cause severe stress for those affected, both in their professional and private lives. Parts of the processes described become analytically tangible as territorialization *by* and *of* the far right in the sense of socio-spatial power claims. For example, it is part of the practices *by* far-right actors during their own events, be they demonstrations, lectures, or concerts, to claim control over these temporary far-right spaces through territorialization processes. These practices function performatively, with far-right bodies coming together with the aim of »becoming present in the space and exerting an affective force, perceiving themselves as a community and showing themselves« (HENTSCHEL 2021: 66, translated by the authors). This claim to

power is conveyed through performative acts of displaying banners, flags, clothing, or tattoos, as well as chanting slogans, which produce a collective identity in the respective space (cf. KRELL et al. 2025: 62). In this way, a claim to power is asserted over socially contested spaces such as the city centers of large cities in Eastern Germany, which are used by various political movements as demonstration sites, and is experienced affectively by the participants as empowerment.

Journalists who report on the far right become an active part of these power-laden territorialization processes, as they are perceived by far-right individuals not as neutral reporting authorities, but as enemies. The interview statements repeatedly contain passages in which the journalists interviewed express incomprehension about the rejection and hostility they encounter from the far right. This makes it impossible to present the views of far-right groups in reporting when they refuse interview or sound bite requests, for example. This practice can be explained by the logic of performative territorialization processes, according to which far-right individuals express their ideologically motivated rejection of press representatives, for example during demonstrations, by refusing to talk to them and obstructing their work through various embodied practices that escalate to the point of physical violence. In this way, far-right individuals enforce their own claim to power over temporarily territorialized spaces by using physical violence to decide who has the right to be in certain places and who does not. In the context of journalism, this corresponds to an attempt to gain control over who is allowed to report on far-right events and in what manner. The aim is to make journalistic reporting more difficult through these territorializations, while far-right media activists are tasked with disseminating propaganda-style coverage of the events.

Territorialization *by* the far right thus explains how hostility towards the press manifests itself on the ground. However, there are ideological causes and other motives behind this, which lead the far right to perceive journalists as enemies and attempt to drive them away from their demonstrations. The Anti-Semitic narrative of the »Jewish« or »lying press« is widespread in far-right worldviews and is cultivated at events organized by the scene. According to this narrative, the media system is part of a Jewish global conspiracy that manipulates society with targeted disinformation. Since the far-right protests against coronavirus measures, this narrative has become more prevalent again as a justification for hostility towards the press (cf. KÖHLER 2024: 297f.).

Violence against the press only occurs when certain contextual factors come together and the support that individual perpetrators receive from their own ranks is crucial: if perpetrators encounter opposition, they are more likely to abandon their attacks. If, however, perpetrators experience support due to advanced radicalization processes within their own ranks, violence becomes a legitimate means of achieving their goals (cf. *ibid.*: 298f.). Here the actions of the

police and the judiciary play a decisive role: if journalists are benefitting from press protection concepts at gatherings and perpetrators hostile to the press are vigorously prosecuted, at least completed acts of violence will decrease (I3_Z35; cf. KÖHLER 2024: 304ff.). Accordingly, the interviewed journalists express the desire for law enforcement agencies to take a more protective approach to journalism: better cooperation during demonstrations (I3_Z35) and opportunities to maintain their anonymity in criminal proceedings and when filing legal complaints (I1_Z160).

Another way to ensure the protection of journalists during dangerous reporting assignments is the use of bodyguards. An established example of this is the *Between the Lines* initiative, which provides volunteer bodyguards to freelance journalists, thereby helping to improve their safety. For freelance journalists who are well known by the far right, such services are sometimes a prerequisite for continuing their work at all, as they relieve them of the worry about their otherwise severely threatened safety:

»I usually leave security measures and such things to my bodyguards. They always take care of it. [...] So without bodyguards, I would have to stop my work« (I1_Z102; I1_Z118).

The violent territorialization *by* the far right, in turn, has consequences that can be analyzed as specific territorialization processes *of* the far right. The impact on journalists who cover far-right actors is experienced by these journalists as connected to particular spaces. Experiences they had during their work are engraved in their perception of these places and affect their private lives: experiencing hostility and violence during a far-right rally taking place in a central city square causes negative emotions for journalists even when they enter the same place without a far-right protest being present at that particular moment. We understand this as affective territorialization *of* the far right, as journalists experience the space as emotionally charged: the central square remains a far-right space for them, even when the right-wingers are no longer there:

»I don't know how to describe it, you just get fed up with these places at some point. Even if these places were deserted, you just don't feel like going there anymore« (I1_Z112, translated by the authors).

Additionally, journalists experience threats and violence in their private lives, far away from the places they report on, turning spaces that were previously considered safe into unsafe far-right spaces for them. In this way, spaces of private life such as one's own home or the supermarket become affective territorialized *of* the far right, as journalists feel powerless in the face of the threats they have experienced from far-right individuals and produce these spaces as dangerous. This territorialization can escalate to such an extent that almost every space is perceived as dangerous, which can lead to constant fear of renewed threats. The danger posed by far-right threats against journalists is evident in this process of territorialization, which restricts their quality of life: Even when the work as

a journalist ends, the negative emotions resulting from the experiences remain, linked to certain places. The latent danger of being recognized and threatened remains in everyday life, which inevitably involves moving through spaces that are also frequented by the far right.

Conclusion

The analysis of the interviews shows how the mechanisms through which the far right's hatred of journalists works. Through various forms of processes taking place in spaces that can be analyzed as modes of territorialization, journalists experience the negative consequences of their work on a daily basis. Approaching these experiences territorializations makes it possible to differentiate between the ongoing negotiations between various social actors on the ground: Who attacks journalists where? Who supports them in which situations and in what ways? Where are they safe and where not, and through which measures? From this perspective, the journalists' accounts demonstrate that there are effective measures that improve their safety in the context of their work, whether it be protection by volunteer escorts or better police work. However, measures to protect journalists in their private lives are not yet foreseeable, as this extends over larger spatial and temporal dimensions. Further efforts are needed here from all actors involved in media work.

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Focus: Press Freedom and Right-Wing Extremism

Horst Pöttker

Freedom of the press and right-wing extremism

A dilemma? Theses on how journalists should deal with the AfD

Abstract: The freedom of the press is regarded as a necessary but insufficient framework for social communication and democratic problem-solving. It is the task of journalists to fill this framework with appropriate content. Right-wing extremism is understood as the disregard of constitutionally guaranteed fundamental rights, favoring instead ethnic unity and nationalist aggression. Journalists cannot effectively counter the threatening rise of right-wing extremism by ignoring it or expressing outrage. And treating the AfD like any other party leads to a problematic normalization of right-wing extremist statements and intentions. In contrast, a strategy of objective, fearless, concrete, and, at the same time, sober reporting on intentions and plans that violate fundamental rights, as well as their foreseeable consequences in the event that organizations such as the AfD come to power, can contribute to curbing right-wing extremism. In order to implement such a strategy, the repression of the Nazi past, populist tendencies in journalism, and the journalistic focus on political institutions must be overcome.

Keywords: AfD, outrage, journalistic fearlessness, normalization, freedom of the press, right-wing extremism, objective reporting, repression

The aim is to clarify which journalistic options are available for reporting on right-wing extremist statements and organizations such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in a way that can help curb right-wing extremism without disregarding press freedom and professional principles.

Terms

The freedom of the press was established relatively late in Germany (cf. PÖTTKER 2016). Since 1949, Article 5 of the Grundgesetz (GG) [Basic Law] has stated: »Freedom of the press and freedom of reporting by means of broadcasts and films shall be guaranteed. There shall be no censorship.« This refers not only to the production and dissemination of information, but also to its reception: »Every person shall have the right ...to inform themselves without hindrance from generally accessible sources.« The following paragraph makes it clear that this is not an unconditional freedom: »These rights shall find their limits in the provisions of general laws, in provisions for the protection of young persons and in the right to personal honor.«

Freedom of expression, guaranteed by the Basic Law, is one of the irrevocable individual rights. The freedom of the press also has an indispensable *social* value, especially for democracies. Its importance for good governance and social cohesion was already recognized in Germany, which lagged behind Western democracies (cf. PLESSNER 1959), during the restorative era of censorship measures prescribed by the Carlsbad Decrees [Karlsbader Beschlüsse]. In 1830, constitutional lawyer Carl Theodor Welcker wrote in a petition to the German Federal Assembly:

»The government[...] can do nothing more effective than to maintain knowledge of all the empirical circumstances and needs of the entire people, especially its trade and commerce, and to continuously acquire the wisest ideas and the best advice from all members of the nation in order to correctly assess and deal with these circumstances. [...] Freedom of the press simultaneously mediates and organically unites the nation and the government and their forces for the common purpose.[...] Freedom of the press establishes[...] for both the best safeguard against disruption of the union through their own aberrations.« (WELCKER 1981: 76f.)¹¹

After 1949, the Federal Constitutional Court issued several landmark rulings strengthening the freedom of the press on the basis of its social significance, for example in the *Spiegel* ruling of 1966:

»The press [...] critically summarizes the opinions and demands that are constantly being formed in society and its groups, presents them for discussion, and brings them to the attention of the political authorities [...]; in doing so, the possible beneficial consequences of publication must also be taken into account. For example, exposing significant weaknesses in defense readiness may, despite the initial military disadvantages associated with

1 Welcker and other liberals had succeeded in temporarily securing the enactment of a liberal press law through their efforts in the Grand Duchy of Baden. However, it was only applied from March 1, 1832 to July 5 of the same year, when the German Federal Assembly decided »that the Press Act that had come into effect in the Grand Duchy of Baden on March 1, 1832 ([...]) was incompatible with existing federal legislation on the press and therefore could not remain in force« (quoted in WELCKER 1981: XIII). For demands for freedom of the press and their justifications even before that, see WILKE 1987: 93–98.

it, be more important for the welfare of the Federal Republic in the long term than secrecy.« (BVerfG, Spiegel ruling, August 5, 1966, cited in PÖTTKER 2012: 44)

For all fundamental rights, the formal framework of the Basic Law is not sufficient for democracy.

»What is written in the constitution is one thing; another thing is the question of whether and how the values formulated in it are actually implemented. But that is what matters.«

(LAMMERT 2007: 6)

The well-known dictum of constitutional lawyer Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, that the liberal state depends on conditions that it cannot itself ensure through laws and authoritative commands (cf. BÖCKENFÖRDE 1976: 60), expresses a central problem of democracies. In the case of press freedom, however, this does not appear to be an unsolvable dilemma. After all, there is the *profession of journalism*, which exists specifically to bring the goals of transparency and social integration down from the heavens of idealism to the earth of their implementation. In capitalist democracies such as the Federal Republic of Germany (cf. GG Art. 20), markets and elections are the most important regulatory mechanisms. They can only function if as many citizens as possible know what is for sale or up for election. The journalistic profession therefore has the task of disseminating accurate and important information as widely as possible. Its basic norm is to publish, to make public what is happening in the world. This basic norm is limited only by doubts as to whether messages are accurate, important to the audience, and can be understood by them.

In order to fulfill their basic standard, journalists must assume that their audience is mature, i.e., capable of dealing with information intelligently and processing it in their own interest, ideally through discourse with one another.^[2] The task of the journalism profession is not to influence the audience, but to make the world transparent as it is.^[3] People in modern societies must be able to rely on there being at least *one* profession that consistently pursues this goal.

In order to ensure the accuracy and comprehensibility of its information, the journalistic profession has developed techniques for researching and presenting information (journalistic »craft«); however, *importance* cannot be achieved in this way, because it is not inherent in the events and processes that need to be reported or not reported, but is *subjectively* attributed.^[4] With regard to the reception

2 The realistic reference to the de facto immaturity of the public can be countered by the argument that this also depends on how consistently journalists adhere to their basic professional standards. Withholding information tends to reinforce immaturity, while fearless and free reporting strengthens the ability to deal intelligently with challenging information.

3 The world is shaped by professions performing their tasks more or less consistently. This applies to journalism as it does to all other professions.

4 Nevertheless, even with regard to this quality, journalism is required to do something that is not arbitrary; a soccer report that only mentions the home team's goals and not the final score would not only be incomplete, but also incorrect.

aspect of press freedom, media diversity and also personnel diversity, and thus diversity of relevance, criteria are therefore required.

Democracy thrives not least on conflicts over positions of power and authority (cf. PÖTTKER 1980: 180-261). The institutionalization of elections – and thus election campaigns – , but also the right to go on strike, demonstrate, and petition, reveal this conflictual core of democracy on a formal level.

In order for conflicts of interest to be resolved and problems to be regulated, it is part of the democratic quality of journalism to make internal social conflicts, e.g., between social classes, visible in reporting. In contrast, the nationalistic and ethnocentric emphasis on external conflicts in a society imagined as homogeneous («Volksgemeinschaft») expresses an anti-democratic tendency, because problem-regulating debates are hindered by the concealment of genuine conflicts of interest (cf. PÖTTKER 1980: 338-589). If too few such debates take place, increased social pressure can lead to the collapse of the democratic system.

What does *extremism* mean from a democratic perspective? Given the irreversibility that both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the German Constitution attribute to fundamental rights, considering their legitimate restrictions, it stands to reason that ideologies that seek to justify disregarding the fundamental rights enshrined in the concept of *human dignity* for the sake of supposedly higher (state) goals should be labeled extremist. Whether it is left-wing or right-wing extremism is measured by the fundamental rights that are called into question by the respective ideology. In the case of left-wing extremism, this primarily concerns property and inheritance rights, unless the legitimate restrictions laid down in Articles 14 and 15 of the German Basic Law (expropriation or socialization for the common good, compensation, legal regulation) are observed.

In the case of *right-wing extremism*, it is primarily equality, the right to asylum, freedom of religion, the right to citizenship, and protection from extradition that are still considered vulnerable even when the legitimate restrictions granted in Articles 16 and 16a of the German Basic Law (in the case of extraditions, requirements of an international court of justice, security of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the destination country) are not met. According to right-wing extremist ideologies, these fundamental rights can be disregarded for the sake of national homogeneity. They are characterized by an ethnocentric, nationalistic, or racist overemphasis on external conflicts with other nations, states, or cultures. This is anti-democratic insofar as it ignores the values of minority protection and the legitimacy of conflicts of power that are constitutive of democracies.

Starting point

According to many observers, *right-wing extremism* currently poses the greatest threat to democracy.^[5] The Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, which the German domestic intelligence service has classified as right-wing extremist until further notice,^[6] received over 20 percent of the vote for the first time in the 2025 federal election and became the strongest party in the East German states.^[7] The AfD's right-wing extremism is characterized by its use of nationalist rhetoric to curtail the rights of ethnic and sexual minorities and the right to asylum, and even to forcibly return migrants with German citizenship (»remigration«).^[8] A characteristic feature of the extreme right-wing threat to democracy posed by this party, but also by other, largely banned organizations, is not least the trivialization of the crimes against humanity committed by the Nazi regime (which the honorary chairman of the AfD Alexander Gauland referred to as a »just speck of bird shit« in German history) to outright denial, often accompanied by the illegal use of Nazi symbols and slogans.^[9]

What poses a particular threat to democracy is that right-wing extremist organizations and individuals not only pursue a political strategy, but above all wage *culture wars* not only against gender-neutral language, but above all against the existing diversity of religion, gender, sexuality, etc., and thus against fundamental rights. Their aim is to influence the thinking and behavior of young people in particular, whose attitudes are not yet firmly established, in line with a populist anti-democratic ideology. This is apparently successful, as there is a disproportionately high number of AfD voters among young men in particular (cf. ZDF/DPA 2024). This is also due to the fact that right-wing extremist campaigns use the digital means of communication preferred by young people. A typical feature of this is the invocation of freedom of opinion and expression, whereby its limits are ignored.^[10]

5 This does not contradict the fact that Islamist extremism also threatens democracy. For even though Salafism acts as a competitor and opponent of German nationalist right-wing extremism in everyday political life, it shares structural similarities with it, for example in terms of ethnocentrism and rejection of religious freedom, which attack the pluralistic and tolerant core of democratic culture in the same way.

6 See the following: MEDIENDIENST INTEGRATION 2025.

7 In other European countries, right-wing populist or right-wing extremist parties are even more successful; in some, such as Hungary, Italy, and Slovakia, they lead the government.

8 The AfD made the expatriation of German citizens part of its election platform in January 2025, when its chairwoman Alice Weidel trumpeted the term »remigration« at the party conference with an audible undertone of deportation.

9 For example, the Thuringian AfD leader Björn Höcke provocatively repeated the SA slogan »Everything for Germany!« in public, the propagandistic use of which is prohibited by law, as is the denial of the Holocaust, and then naively claimed ignorance in the criminal proceedings that followed; he was convicted of this by the Federal Court of Justice. (See DTS NEWS AGENCY 2025).

10 The extent to which right-wing populist and right-wing extremist statements, especially in digital networks, can be legally curbed by these barriers – legal regulations, personal honor, but also the protection of minors – is a question that has not yet been answered clearly enough in comparison to its significance

Hesitation on the part of state authorities in defending fundamental rights against rising right-wing extremism is inappropriate, even if the AfD's share of the vote in the West German states is (still) lower than in eastern Germany or that of corresponding parties in Austria, France, and other European countries.^[11] The tough debate over banning the AfD shows how problematic indecision is here. The Constitutional Court didn't ban the NPD in 2017 because it was politically too insignificant (see BVerfG 2017). A ban on the AfD is currently rejected on the grounds that banning the largest opposition party in the Bundestag would be seen as unfairly eliminating a political rival and would drive even more voters into the arms of the AfD.^[12] The political debate, which is cited as a better alternative to a ban, has not slowed the AfD's growth in votes so far, especially since the debate with this party to win over its voters is largely conducted with similarly anti-minority rhetoric.

Right-wing extremism wraps a soft shell of ostensibly bourgeois decency and democratic normality around its hard core of ethnocentric and racist disregard for fundamental rights.^[13] When leading AfD politicians are interviewed on public radio or television, they are careful not to explicitly question the Basic Law, especially on high-profile programs such as Deutschlandfunk's *Interview der Woche* [the interview of the week] or *Caren Miosga*, a weekly talk show on ARD.^[14] Even in its official manifesto, the AfD presents itself as harmless and hardly reveals its misanthropic grimace. The preamble, for example, reads:

for democracy; The elastic and ambiguous concept of illegal »defamatory criticism« to protect the »right to personal honor« seems too vague for this purpose.

- 11 This is also related to the fact that the West German population had to face up to the crimes against humanity committed by the Nazi regime as part of its own past in a lengthy process of coming to terms with the past, and therefore remembers it more intensely. Politically, this is evident, for example, in a phenomenon such as the »firewall« against the AfD, which does not exist in other countries. The Austrian population has long exculpated itself as the »first victim,« in France people only knew the Resistance and not collaboration, in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) Auschwitz and the Second World War were blamed on capitalism, and the GDR did not even assume the legal succession of the »Third Reich.«
- 12 Shouldn't such bans be decided exclusively on the basis of the goals, programs, and internal structures of parties, regardless of the strength of their electorate?
- 13 The Janus-faced nature of the AfD was illustrated by an observation made by the author during the 2024 state election campaign in the state of Hesse: Next to a party stand where elderly gentlemen in suits and ties were distributing the official program, a citizen had set up a sign displaying anti-constitutional and Nazi-affiliated quotes from AfD politicians. The »Verfassungsblog« (Constitutional Blog) of renowned lawyers (<https://verfassungsblog.de/stellungnahme-parteiverbotsverfahren-afd/>, 9/27/2025) lists 115 such quotes, from Alice Weidel's »Lower the barriers for dual-citizenship criminals: Revoke German citizenship and deport them!« to Alexander Gauland's »That's what a German-Turkish woman says. Invite her to Eichsfeld and then tell her what specifically German culture is. After that, she'll never come back here, and we'll be able to dispose of her in Anatolia, thank God.« and René Springer's »We will repatriate foreigners to their home countries. Millions of them. This is not a secret plan. It is a promise.« to Maximilian Krah's »Because some conservatives now defend feminism, I would like to point out that the current »intersectional« feminism of the third wave is, of course, »queer« – that is, explicitly directed against biologically determined femininity. This is social cancer!«
- 14 For the controversial discussion about the invitation of AfD politicians to Miosga's talk show, see SCHULTZ 2024.

»We are committed democrats. [...] We could no longer stand by and watch the breakdown of law and order and the destruction of the constitutional state [...]. [...] As free citizens, we stand for direct democracy, the separation of powers, and the rule of law [...].« (AFD 2016: 6)¹⁵¹

This strategy includes backtracking after overly provocative anti-constitutional statements, revealing a deliberate strategy toward reputable media outlets and their audiences.¹⁶¹ In 2025, the AfD even adopted a new code of conduct in order to appear more moderate in the Bundestag (cf. GANSWINDT 2025).

Through its Janus-faced nature, the AfD contributes to inconsistency in the journalistic treatment of right-wing extremism, which expresses uncertainty rather than diversity:

»The spectrum of opinion on this issue is extremely broad, ranging from ›treat them like any other party‹ to ›completely exclude them from reporting so as not to give them a platform‹. Prominent voices can be found for each of these positions.« (BLÜMEL 2025: 14)

There is only a certain degree of consistency in two editorial practices. Where possible, home stories featuring AfD politicians are avoided so as not to obscure their political intentions from the audience by creating personal sympathy.¹⁷¹

The other point of agreement concerns the verification of factual claims made by politicians. Since Donald Trump started flooding international politics with misinformation, *fact-checking* during and after interviews has become a professional standard in journalism.¹⁸¹ When asked about their approach to the AfD, local editorial offices mention the usual verification of factual statements made by politicians, which is carried out particularly thoroughly in this case (cf. BLÜMEL 2025: 16f.).

The tips for editorial offices provided by the German Journalists' Association NRW state:

»Journalistic tools such as thorough research, questioning, and classifying statements remain central.« (»5 TIPPS« 2025: 20)

Accuracy can be subject to rules of craftsmanship, but this does not apply to *importance*, i.e., the selection of what is communicated and what is not. The main

15 The nationalist core of the AfD's manifesto can only be found further down under the heading »More children instead of mass immigration.« There, the demographic birth deficit of around 300,000 to 400,000 per year, which has been continuing for half a century, is linked to »around 100,000 abortions per year.« (AFD 2016: 41)

16 The apparent credibility of such statements is enhanced by the fact that the party initially only gathered around economics professors who considered the euro to be detrimental to European cohesion. The gradual shift towards right-wing extremism, which led to the departure of several founders, took place long below the threshold of public perception.

17 The fact that the personalization of politics is problematic for democracy has long been discussed in political science and journalism. See IMHOFF/SCHULZ 1998: 193-356.

18 After all, they aim to ensure that information is accurate and thus preserve the fundamental journalistic quality of accuracy. However, it is not certain whether they can do much to protect democracy from right-wing extremism, given the difficulty of refuting political claims in live interviews and the general decline in the cultural significance of evidence.

problem with right-wing extremism is not that it distorts facts and disregards the requirement of empirical accuracy. The central problem with the AfD, which is currently growing at an alarming rate, is that as a political party it disregards the normative foundations spelled out in the first 19 articles of the Basic Law and summarized in the concept of human dignity.

Criticism

Democracy effectively cannot be defended through speeches in the Bundestag [German Parliament] alone. This is also due to the culture war waged by the AfD and other right-wing extremist organizations. But even if democratic parties would make use of digital platforms in the same way as right-wing extremists, it would not suffice. In addition to political statements and legal measures, attention must also be paid to journalism, its media, and their handling of right-wing extremism. Is journalism fulfilling its task of using press freedom in such a way that the problem of growing right-wing extremism can be regulated and the AfD's increase in votes can be curbed without disregarding basic journalistic standards?

There is also uncertainty about how to deal with right-wing extremism even within the same medium. Public broadcasting is committed to internal plurality of the political opinions represented in it. But when dealing with anti-constitutional right-wing extremism, is a desirable plurality of positions and journalistic working methods even an issue?

On June 14, 2025, the national public radio station Deutschlandfunk aired a controversial discussion between two of its leading journalists, Friedbert Meurer, head of the news department, and Christiane Florin, head of the culture department, on the program *Streitkultur* [Culture of debate]. Florin advocated a strategy of refraining from interviewing AfD representatives because this would require a common basis for communication that does not exist; a position that ultimately amounts to reporting little or nothing about the AfD, because interviews are also indispensable research tools. It is obvious that this consequence is incompatible with the basic journalistic mission of making the world as it is, and to which right-wing extremism in the form of the AfD undoubtedly belongs, comprehensively transparent. In contrast Meurer argued

»Deutschlandfunk must represent the entire spectrum of opinions as far as possible [...].

Interviews are difficult, but they are part of the job.« (BLÜMEL 2025: 20)

This boils down to treating the AfD like other parties, a position that communications scientist Marcus Maurer has also advocated, calling on journalists

»simply to remember their craft when reporting on the AfD: to report in a fact-based and objective (not moralizing) manner, as should also be a matter of course in the case of other parties.« (MAURER 2019: 137f.)

The reference to the *craft* of journalism, which is often heard in such contexts, is problematic because, unlike many skilled trades, journalism is subject to a greater need for change. It must adapt immediately to upheavals in the political, social, and technological conditions that it is reporting on and which also constitute the conditions of its production. This requires the willingness and ability to make profound changes to its own self-image and work methods (cf. PÖTTKER 2024).

The strategy of treating the right-wing extremism embodied by the AfD as normal is particularly problematic because it relativizes its hostility toward fundamental rights and the German Basic Law. The fact that Maurer rejects both the strategy of reporting little or nothing about the AfD and the spontaneous response of expressing outrage about it is evidence of realistic skepticism regarding the prospects of success.¹⁹ Ignoring and moralizing lead the public to perceive the victim role that right-wing extremists claim for themselves with their propaganda as authentic, as long as they are not yet in power everywhere. But when Maurer argues that treating the AfD like other parties in normal journalistic practice does not necessarily mean »critically ignoring right-wing extremist tendencies in parts of the party,« but that »reporting should [...] not be limited to these aspects,« (MAURER 2019: 138), this amounts to an appeasing cover-up of what fundamentally threatens democracy through right-wing extremists.

Both, ignoring and normalizing, demonstrate a reluctance deeply incompatible with journalistic professionalism – namely to face the right-wing extremist threat to democracy with open eyes. This reluctance is often justified by the argument that one does not want to offer the AfD a »platform«; or one focuses on its soft bourgeois shell, with which the party surrounds itself in official political life for purposes of legitimization, while overlooking its hard core of anti-constitutionalism and inhumanity.²⁰

The fact that neither journalistic suppression nor outrage nor normalization leads to success cannot sufficiently be justified by the increasing number of voters and elected representatives of the AfD (see MEDIENDIENST INTEGRATION 2025). In addition to misguided journalistic strategies, other reasons can be found in politics itself. Above all, the social discourse on migration has gone

19 Another convincing angle is that the traditional focus of political journalism on mutual criticism between parties and »the media's tendency to predominantly address problems and conflicts and to portray established parties and institutions in a negative light« (MAURER 2019: 139) contributes to an image of politics that makes extremist hostility toward the elites of the democratic system, including its media, appear credible; cf. PÖTTKER 1985.

20 Another factor might be that journalists who do not overlook this danger expose themselves to a threat from the AfD; cf. the article by Michael Krell et al. in this issue.

astray, for which journalism is partly responsible.²¹ However, this does not change the inappropriateness of the journalistic strategies mentioned above. Maurer's critical analysis is convincing when it comes to ignoring and expressing outrage. But there are also skeptical voices from the social sciences regarding his recommended approach to the AfD in the form of everyday »craftsmanship.« Journalist Corinna Blümel reports in the magazine of the German Journalists' Association NRW on what political scientist Cord Schmelze has to say about this practice:

»The portrayal in media that are perceived as reputable makes these [right-wing extremist] positions part of the legitimate spectrum of opinion and lends them legitimacy because the credibility of the media is transferred to them.« (BLÜMEL 2025: 14)

One slippery slope that leads to this trap is the traditional focus of political reporting on the legislative, executive, and judicial institutions, vis-à-vis and within which right-wing extremist organizations like to show their harmless side (cf. WAGNER 2025). Against the backdrop of this tradition, it may seem obsolete to report on AfD statements at the lower political levels. However, in order to reveal the anti-democratic core of the AfD, it can be particularly revealing to directly report »that [and especially how] an AfD politician insulted the Federal Government's Integration Commissioner in an East German village hall« (MAURER 2019: 138). Quoting the hollow commitment to democracy from the official AfD program on one hand, or giving Tino Chrupalla, who is considered the »good cop« at the party leadership and is committed to moderation, the opportunity to make reassuring statements in an interview, on the other hand, has the effect of trivializing the issue.

Nevertheless, not every right-wing extremist provocation that strategically targets the media-constructed public sphere should be met with immediate outrage, as demanded by news journalism fixated on spectacular events and maximum speed. Beyond moralizing, ignoring, and normalizing, is there another way of reporting on right-wing extremism that can hopefully contribute more to its containment?

Recommendations

One such strategy could be to expose the true nature of right-wing extremism, which threatens the self-determination and lives of each and every individual, through *factual, sober, unbiased, and fearless* reporting. It cannot be ruled out that insights into the brutal activities and intentions of right-wing extremist

21 Instead of being portrayed as a problem, migration should be presented as a welcome opportunity to counteract demographic decline and aging, as well as the resulting problems such as labor shortages and pension insecurity.

organizations might also lead to a grounding in human rights and a stronger commitment to defending the Basic Law.^[22]

Criticism of the ineffective, even reinforcing outrage over right-wing extremism concerns the broad field of expression of opinion in the media.^[23] However, the task of making the world as it is transparent mainly involves the widest possible dissemination of accurate and important *facts*. This also applies to the professional handling of right-wing extremism and the AfD.

When it comes to the quality of relevance, which is not subject to binding rules, the question is which subjective selection preferences are more or less justifiable. With regard to right-wing extremism, it seems to me most justifiable to prioritize information that shows its anti-constitutional nature. Instead of ignoring right-wing extremism, being outraged by it, or downplaying it by focusing on its veneer of legitimacy, it is possible under the condition of press freedom and important for self-determination to concentrate the selection of information on facts that reveal the anti-constitutional core of right-wing extremism.

This may also include placing news items, e.g., about statements made by the AfD, in an objective *context* that highlights the core substance of right-wing extremism, which disregards fundamental rights. In some circumstances, this may also be possible in interviews, with the interviewer persistently pointing out facts that reveal the anti-human rights aspirations of right-wing extremism.

It may therefore be more promising to comment less on the classification of the AfD as a confirmed right-wing extremist party by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution and more on the specific circumstances *that led* to this classification. These include not only the AfD's anti-constitutional demands, but also the *consequences* for the existence of the democratic, order guaranteeing fundamental rights and for every individual within it if this party were to come to power and realize its intentions.

In societies whose highly complex structures block insight into the consequences of actions, the task of journalism is not only to examine current circumstances. It also requires publicizing the foreseeable effects of the actions of many people, and thus of each and every individual, in order to make them aware of the consequences of their actions and inactions and to promote a sense of responsibility for them (cf. PÖTTKER 1996; 1997: 303–315).

22 Smart observers see a sense of belonging and a willingness to fight as basic human needs that right-wing extremism can exploit because left-liberal politics offers little in the way of satisfying them; see SICHTERMANN/BRÜCKNER 2025.

23 The free expression of opinions in the argumentative genre of commentary is part of journalism's public service mission because it makes transparent the spectrum of subjective views that are possible and exist in a pluralistic social structure within the framework of freedom of expression and freedom of the press and their limitations. In the case of editorials, it can also shed light on the preferences of the media outlet in question when selecting which information to publish and which not to publish.

The obligation to make the foreseeable consequences of actions transparent correlates with the certainty with which these consequences will occur. Today, no one would dispute that it is part of the journalist's duty to point out, for example, the connection between CO₂ emissions caused in part by consumer habits and the threat global warming poses to humanity;^[24] the same applies to consumer behavior as to voting behavior: the more votes the AfD receives, the more certain it is to assume that we can no longer rely on the fundamental rights guaranteed by our Basic Law.

Historical journalistic reviews can also help in this regard (cf. PÖTTKER 2011). 1933 does not have to repeat itself, nor does Auschwitz have to happen again. But we Germans in particular not only have every reason, but also a good opportunity and strong incentive to remember what it means when the consequences of growing right-wing extremism are misjudged.

Specifically, for example, reporting on migration policy could focus less on the contradictions between European Union law and border controls and more on the consequences in the everyday lives of those affected if an AfD-dominated executive were to realize its project of »remigrating« people with a migration history.^[25] Plus: in an immigration society without migrants, could we (still) expect to receive adequate treatment in the event of an accident or illness, to have our roofs or computers repaired, to dispose of waste, or to acquire up-to-date knowledge while studying?

Apart from the explicit threat to fundamental rights such as personal freedom, equality, freedom of religion, freedom of movement, citizenship, or asylum, the *tone* of right-wing extremist statements also reveals a lack of respect for others and thus a disregard for human dignity as the supreme fundamental right, which in Article 5 of the German Basic Law corresponds to the »right to personal honor« as a barrier to freedom of the press.

Quality media outlets must not be content to reproduce standard news agency reports on the activities of the AfD and leave further research to poorly paid and risk-taking freelancers at best. They should – ideally in competitive alliances such as Netzwerk Recherche (NETZWERK RECHERCHE 2025) – conduct thorough research into the AfD's anti-constitutional activities and their foreseeable effects.

One example of this is the research conducted by the investigative portal Correctiv on the secret Potsdam conference, at which protagonists not only from the AfD recommended the mass repatriation of German citizens with a migrant background – »remigration« in the sense of deportation (cf. MÜLLER 2024).

24 The same applies to other aspects of environmental change such as plastic pollution, the extinction of species, or groundwater depletion.

25 What is the proportion of migrants in the staff of hospitals or construction companies? How many refugees work in waste disposal, but also in the German digital economy or science? How can the birth deficit of around 300,000 per year be offset in view of the already noticeable labor shortage that is driving economic stagnation?

Another example of factual, sober reporting on anti-democratic extremism and its foreseeable consequences is the unbiased essay by U.S. journalist Ava Kofman on the right-wing intellectual Curtis Yarvin, who pulls the ideological strings behind the Trumpism of J.D. Vance, Peter Thiel, etc. (cf. KOFMAN 2025).

When reporting on demands that violate fundamental rights and describing the consequences that their implementation would have, a didactic tone should be avoided, even if this is difficult. Even here, professionalism requires that spontaneous feelings be put aside. There is a justified fear that indignant distancing on the part of the audience could easily give rise to the impression, inflated by AfD propaganda, that its politicians are being made victims who are persecuted for the sake of their cause (giving them a martyr status) (cf. ROKAHR 2025). Lecturing often leads to the opposite of what it is intended to be achieved, especially when it comes to young people. Right-wing extremist propaganda can take advantage of this by ridiculing those who lecture.

Avoiding populist educational intentions is also advisable because the *style* of dealing with right-wing extremism can reinforce the impression of collusion between politics and journalism. A factual, sober tone is also appropriate to emphasize journalistic independence from the ruling political establishment and its constant appeals.

With such a professional strategy, journalism can influence election results despite the presence of right-wing populists and extremists in digital networks. This was demonstrated, for example, in the repeat presidential election in Romania in 2025 (cf. GROSS/SCHULTZ 2025).

Problems

As promising as a strategy of fearless objectivity may be, it is difficult to implement. This is primarily because a thorough presentation of what right-wing extremism actually means requires more in-depth research than giving in to repression, outrage, or normalization. But the resources for research have become scarcer as a result of the economic crisis into which digitization has plunged the journalistic profession.^[26] To make matters worse, the inappropriate ways of dealing with right-wing extremism can also be explained by historically grown socio-cultural circumstances that cannot be eliminated.

It is revealing that journalism research in Germany has long observed a tendency, particularly in the regional press, to report on Nazi-affiliated activities, if at all, only when packaged in a reassuring portrayal of critical counter-activities

²⁶ This problem is exacerbated by the fact that the AfD hides its true core behind a facade of political normality that is not easy to penetrate.

(cf. PENZHORN 2009; REICHEL/WICKING 2010). This has been observed in newspapers in both, the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the old Federal Republic of Germany. The reluctance to report unvarnished what neo-Nazis say about their brutal intentions and plans reflects not only the fear of right-wing extremist reactions, to which local journalism in particular is exposed (cf. KRELL et al. in this issue), but also a tendency to *repress* everything related to the crimes against humanity committed by the Nazi regime. As understandable as the rejection of this literally unbelievable past may be (cf. PÖTTKER 2005: esp. 7–10), professional journalism that takes its task of making the world transparent seriously, including its terrible realities, must overcome the unconscious refusal to acknowledge Auschwitz, Buchenwald, or Oradour. Swimming against the tide of repression through professional self-education is one of the difficulties that make it hard to deal with right-wing extremism in an unbiased way.

An unconsciously *unbroken* tradition of both German dictatorships, fascist and socialist, is expressed in the journalistic tendency to express *outrage* at right-wing extremism. Being outraged contains an element of condemnation that is intended to influence others. In both dictatorships, journalists were regarded as educators of the nation (cf. PÖTTKER 2008a); the 1933 Editors Act^[27] and Lenin's view of the functions of socialist journalism, as taught in the GDR^[28], assigned them this task of educating the people. Admittedly, journalism in West Germany after 1945, with the help of the Allies, and in East Germany after 1990, under pressure from Western politicians and corporations (cf. KLAMMER 1998; TRÖGER 2019), adopted, at least on the surface, the Anglo-Saxon model of reporting free from political influence. But cultural continuities are more enduring than institutional upheavals. For example, the separation of news and commentary in German media is not organizationally anchored by separating the respective editorial offices, as is the case with the *New York Times* (cf. THE NEWSROOM 2025^[29]). The same can be assumed for the traditional self-image of educating the people, which is fading but has yet to completely disappear.^[30]

27 The Nazi Editors' Law of October 4, 1933 refers to the journalistic »task of exerting intellectual influence on the public,« which should include the duty to »keep everything out of the newspapers: [...] that is likely to weaken the power of the German Reich externally or internally, the community spirit of the German people, German defense capabilities, culture, or economy.«

28 »Based on extensive experience with the workers' press, Lenin gave the classic definition of the functions of socialist journalism: »The newspaper is not only a collective propagandist and collective agitator, but also a collective organizer.« (Works, Vol. 5: 11)« (DICTIONARY OF SOCIALIST JOURNALISM 1984: 70); cf. critically POERSCHKE 2020.

29 There we read: »Our Opinion journalism helps our audience understand the forces shaping the world. Through columns, guest essays, documentaries, podcasts, and more, our Opinion work convenes conversations and showcases sharp arguments that stimulate and challenge the public conversation. *Times Opinion operates independently from the newsroom*, but maintains the rigorous standards of all of our journalism.« (Emphasis added by H.P.)

30 This is illustrated, for example, by a rule of professional ethics such as Section 12.1 of the German Press Code: »When reporting on criminal offenses, care must be taken to ensure that mentioning the suspects' or perpetrators' affiliation with ethnic, religious, or other minorities does not lead to discriminatory generalizations

In order to avoid the counterproductive effects of journalistic outrage about the AfD, it would be useful for journalists to become aware of this tradition and break away from it. Given the persistence of mental habits, this also appears to be a problem that can only be overcome in the very long term.

Normalization and *trivialization* of right-wing extremism are linked to the traditional focus of political reporting on state institutions and interest groups anterior to the state (parties, associations, unions, churches, etc.).^[31] Because right-wing extremist organizations like to present their seemingly democratic side at this institutional level, this view overlooks their anti-constitutional substance.

This problem will also be difficult to overcome, especially since the public relations work of institutions, including that of the AfD, saves journalism the trouble of time-consuming research in view of dwindling resources.^[32] The critical objection that this is also due to the adaptation of public relations work to the expectations of journalism cannot be dismissed; however, this »intereffication« [Intereffikation, the mutual influencing of journalism and public relations] (cf. BENTELE/NOTHAFT 2004; SCHWEIGER 2013) also means that the bubble in which journalism and politics operate perpetuates itself.^[33]

If the strategy of dealing with right-wing extremism in a manner that is as fearless as it is factual and sober is to succeed, these reasons for the ineffective and even counterproductive journalistic treatment of right-wing extremism and the AfD must be recognized and analyzed.

Another, almost insurmountable problem arises from the central structural feature of highly complex societies, which jeopardizes their self-regulation even when democratic self-determination, market control, and freedom of the press are institutionally protected. A high degree of complexity means a high degree of social fragmentation, and each functional fragment, each social (sub)system

about individual misconduct. As a rule, membership should not be mentioned unless there is a justified public interest. Particular attention should be paid to the fact that such mention could fuel prejudice against minorities.« This reflects the intention to protect the public from information that is considered harmful and fuels prejudice, even if it is true; in similar journalistic codes in other countries, this rule does not exist at all (Austria) or has a different burden of proof (Switzerland); see the discussion on this in HERCZEG/PÖTTKER 2018.

- 31 This focus is so deeply rooted in the culture that it is already reflected in the concept of political communication, in which the analysis of political journalism is embedded in communication science: »Political actors are those who [...] are involved in bringing about or enforcing decisions with binding effect on the distribution of power or resources [...]. Typical political actors are parties, parliaments, governments, states, supranational organizations, and their respective members or representatives. [...] It can therefore be said that political communication is communication that is carried out by political actors [...] or that relates to political actors and their activities.« (SCHULZ 2011: 16.) Voters or demonstrators as political actors and thus objects of political reporting are then mentioned »as a matter of course,« but only in a subordinate manner.
- 32 Empirical research on the relationship between public relations and journalism showed decades ago that press releases from parties and associations are predominantly reproduced by journalistic media with little or no modification; cf. BAERNS 1985.
- 33 A cultural studies-inspired approach to journalism may contribute to a long-term solution to this problem if it draws attention to social processes as subjects of reporting that should be taken more seriously and given greater importance than established institutions and structures. See TRAPPE 1973, 1974; PÖTTKER 2004a; LÜNENBORG 2005.

develops its own laws (»autopoiesis,« cf. LUHMANN 1984: 60–64 etc.), which on the one hand guarantees performance in relation to its own function. On the other hand, however, it also leads to isolation from other systems and actors^[34], which makes it difficult to anticipate the delayed consequences of one's own actions.^[35]

Modern societies offer their members psychologically effective compensations for the rejection of reflecting on consequences, such as pseudo-interaction with television actors or computer games. These outlets reduce the pressure caused by frustrated needs of interaction, but weaken problem-regulating social forces.

Highly complex social structures are characterized by a notorious lack of reflexivity regarding consequences^[36], which makes it difficult for professions such as politics, education, and journalism to make the far-reaching effects of many people's actions on climate, nature, or the political system so transparent that the majority can orient their actions toward their own desired goals (cf. PÖTTKER 1997: 124–191, 303–315).

The real dilemma is that the journalistic profession has the task of compensating for the negative effects of the complex social structure under which it itself operates (cf. PÖTTKER 2000, 2008b). When dealing with right-wing extremism, this must not mean slowing down on the fearless and factual reporting on the concrete consequences for society and each of its members when placing power in the hands of a party such as the AfD through individual voting decisions.

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34 »Self-referential systems are closed systems at the level of this self-referential organization, because they do not allow other forms of processing in their self-determination.« (LUHMANN 1984: 60)

35 This is not contradicted by Luhmann's addition: »The concept of a self-referential closed system does not contradict the system's *openness* to the *environment*: the closed nature of self-referential operation is rather a form of expansion of possible environmental contact; by constituting more determinable elements, it increases the complexity of the environment possible for the system.« (LUHMANN 1984: 63) This is because as environmental complexity increases, so does the opacity of the consequences of actions.

36 And with it, the need for regulatory understanding of others, respect, and social integration. From an action theory perspective, social cohesion requires a balance between self-interest and understanding of the subjective meaning that actors attach to their behavior. For the relationship between journalism and politics, see PÖTTKER 2003, 2004b.

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Focus: Press Freedom and Right-Wing Extremism

Iulia Bârză / Veronica Câmpian

Media freedom in the shadow of right-wing extremism

Challenges for Romanian journalists

Abstract: This study examines the relationship between the far right and the media in Romania and highlights the associated tensions that influence journalistic work. The Romanian media system, which historically has been characterized by authoritarian control followed by rapid commercialization, is now facing considerable political pressure, fragile editorial independence, and limited economic stability. The article is based on comparative media system research, e.g. the typology of Hallin and Mancini (2004). To illustrate the current situation, two experienced journalists were interviewed. The journalists emphasize that far-right actors undermine press freedom not through open censorship, but rather through delegitimization, manipulation, and disinformation. The interviewees report hostile relationships characterized by intimidation, verbal aggression, and the exclusion of critical media. At the same time, social networks, the main channels for spreading extremist narratives, are weakening traditional journalism. Nevertheless, there are also signs of resilience: journalists are responding with mutual solidarity, thorough fact-checking, and a renewed commitment to fundamental democratic values. The study concludes that, while the far right creates a climate of intimidation, it also triggers collective resistance from journalists. In order to preserve the press as a democratic safeguard, stricter digital regulations, greater transparency, and the promotion of independent media are essential.

Keywords: right-wing extremism, media freedom, Romania, journalism, interviews

Currently, there is a debate in Romania about whether the state should take more decisive action to curb extremism, hate speech, and disinformation. Some of these measures are necessary in order to comply with EU regulations (e.g., EMFA, Digital Services Act), but the heated atmosphere in Romania and the rise of right-wing extremism are also cited when it comes to stricter laws. At the same time, there is a legitimate concern that new laws could be misused to restrict freedom of expression.

While the media under the communist regime were completely controlled by the government and dissenting voices were suppressed (cf. MARINCEA 2021: 221–222), the fall of communism in 1989 ushered in a profound transformation of the Romanian media system. A dual broadcasting system consisting of public and private media developed. The media transformation process was characterized by rapid privatization, pluralization, and economization (cf. BOTAN 2024: 3; SURUGIU/IONESCU 2018: 191). The result is a hybrid system that is equally influenced by market forces and political influence.

In the field of comparative media system research, Romania is considered the prototype of the polarized-pluralistic model. According to Hallin/Mancini (2004: 98), Romania's media system is characterized by pronounced political parallelism, a low level of professionalization in journalism, and strong state influence. According to Bălășescu et al. (2024: 15), Romanian private television is the main factor in this classification. It dominates both the viewer and advertising markets and is increasingly pushing public broadcasting into a marginal and financially underfunded position. Driven by the pursuit of profit, private television primarily focuses on entertainment formats and sensationalist news in order to generate high advertising revenues. Ownership structures are often closely intertwined with political and economic elites, favoring political influence and clientelism. This significantly restricts editorial independence, resulting in programming that is often more influenced by the interests of media owners than by the principles of independent and objective journalism.

Dennis McQuail (2006: 51) identifies three fundamental tasks and main functions of journalism, each of which has an empirical and a normative component: »... acting as an observer and informant; providing a channel and forum for other voices outside the media themselves; playing a participatory role in society.« However, Gerli et al. (2018: 22) argue that quality journalism requires certain socio-economic conditions. These include, for example, minimal influence from politics and business, and a high degree of journalistic professionalism. The study concludes that Romania currently does not meet the conditions necessary for the development of broad-based, high-quality journalism.

Romania ranked 55th out of 180 in the 2025 Press Freedom Index, a decline from its previous ranking of 49th (Romania | RSF). According to the NGO Reporters Without Borders (2025), media independence in Romania is particularly

threatened by political interference and a lack of transparency in media financing. This is undermining the population's trust in the independence of the media. Evidence of political influence is seen in the appointment of senior positions at public radio and television stations as well as at the National Audiovisual Council. According to Boshnakova and Dankova (2023: 179f.), political influence is also evident in the threat of withdrawal of advertising by political parties and public institutions, which advertising-financed media depend on. The often opaque allocation of public funds to party-affiliated media leads to market distortions and significantly impairs the media's control function (Romania | RSF). Adding to this are less obvious attempts to exert influence and exert more or less gentle pressure on editorial offices, which are not without consequences. In this context, Botan (2024: 2f.) mentions restricted access to information, biased reporting, and self-censorship. All of this weakens the role of journalism as a guarantor of the public interest and a guardian of democracy.

According to Bader and Sîrb (2022: 59), in response to the numerous challenges traditional Romanian media are facing, independent journalism, often referred to as »alternative press,« has emerged over the past decade as a counter-reaction to the loss of quality and ethics in the established media. These initiatives, mostly smaller online platforms, emphasize their independence from political and economic interests and are committed exclusively to the public interest.

The development of the alternative press is taking place in a generally difficult news market characterized by changing consumer habits. According to Botan (2024: 8), the Romanian market for news and content on public affairs is relatively limited, as only 59 percent of the population consumes news. This is low compared to the European average of 72 percent. Television continues to dominate news and current event broadcasting, while print media has experienced a significant decline in readership and circulation. A historic low was reached in 2023. At the same time, online platforms, including social media, are increasing in popularity and have become the preferred sources of news, reflecting a broader global trend.

According to Pentina/Tarafdar (2014: 221), the internet has fundamentally changed patterns of information and news consumption. With an ever-growing selection of channels and sources, as well as expanded opportunities for interaction and participation, today's audiences engage with news differently. This development has profound consequences: traditional print and broadcast media are facing declining advertising revenues, which is affecting the quality of their journalism. At the same time, content on digital communication platforms, whether in blogs, social media, or political forums, is becoming increasingly important. Users not only produce content on these platforms, but also curate it by selecting, disseminating, or hiding specific content. At the same time, the explosive proliferation of often unreliable sources leads to an information

overload that can easily contribute to feeling overwhelmed, superficial knowledge acquisition, and the consolidation of one-sided worldviews (cf. PENTINA/TARAFDAR 2014: 221).

The increased popularity of social networks and changes in media usage behavior point to the profound social change that Romania is currently undergoing. Quite a few people are disappointed and have lost faith in politics (cf. LOVI 2025: 33). This skepticism stems from the perception that the political elite has lost sight of the concerns of ordinary citizens and is only interested in its own advantage. This narrative is spread in particular by far-right parties. They promise far-reaching changes and present themselves as an alternative to the established parties, using their own channels and social media to do so. Lovi (2025) argues that Romania still lacks comprehensive legislation to regulate digital political advertising and misinformation on platforms such as TikTok, Telegram, and Facebook.

How right-wing extremists shape the media: general observations

The rise of radical right-wing parties poses one of the greatest challenges to liberal democracies. Although initially considered a temporary phenomenon, the radical right has established itself as a permanent political force. Contemporary radical right-wing movements differ significantly from their historical predecessors. Plesca and Vasilache (2024: 1f.) emphasize that in Western Europe, the rise of these parties is characterized by nationalism, xenophobia, and Euroscepticism. In several Eastern European countries, including EU members, the rise of right-wing parties is linked to an erosion of democratic standards. This is evident, among other things, in attempts to restrict press freedom, the independence of the judiciary, and the rights of minorities. The rise of these far-right and right-wing populist parties often reflects deep-rooted cultural and historical conflicts that potentially exacerbate social divisions and damage the European Union. According to Mudde (2007: 6), they advocate the liberal democratic system, abide by its rules, and outwardly respect pluralism. This adaptation renders traditional strategies of ostracism and marginalization ineffective. Instead, radical right-wing parties have succeeded in presenting themselves as defenders of »true democracy« and as the authentic voice of ordinary citizens who feel neglected by the political establishment (cf. EATWELL 2003: 226). According to Betz/Johnson (2004: 311), this framing, which allows the radical right to portray itself as a defender of democracy, has proven effective in influencing public debate on controversial issues such as immigration, citizenship, security, law and order, and putting these issues on the political agenda. Behind this democratic façade, however, the radical right continues to engage in aggressive discourse

aimed at weakening and undermining the values and institutions of liberal democracy in order to replace them with an alternative, autocratic political order (cf. Pöttker in this issue). It is its dual character that makes the contemporary radical right particularly difficult to define, as it is both democratic and extreme. What is new are public declarations of support for democracy combined with an anti-liberal political doctrine (cf. PEDAHZUR/WEINBERG 2017: 242). This paradox enables the radical right to operate within a democratic framework while simultaneously spreading ideas that must be classified as extremist and anti-democratic (cf. BETZ/JOHNSON 2004: 311).

While right-wing populists are gaining ground in elections, according to Kaiser et al. (2019: 424) they remain largely excluded from the established, democratic media, where journalistic gatekeeping mechanisms restrict the spread of radical ideologies. Supporters of the far right see this as exclusion and proof of the bias of traditional media, which encourages them to turn to other media. Digital communication platforms enable far-right groups to bypass traditional gatekeepers, spread their messages cost-effectively, and use more radical language than would be possible in established media. In addition to news sites and blogs, social media and messenger services have gained relevance. They promote interaction and solidarity between like-minded communities and reinforce far-right discourse (cf. LOVI 2025: 31).

A key reason for the persuasiveness of populist narratives is the targeted use of emotional rather than rational appeals. Populist communication is mostly dramatic, apodictic, exaggerated, and emotionally charged. Fear and anger about actual or perceived grievances are deliberately stirred up and exploited for political purposes, with claims that urgent action is needed. Communication takes place in simplified, direct, and aggressive language reminiscent of tabloid media (cf. REINEMANN et al. 2015: 15). The spread of disinformation, conspiracy narratives, and blame deepens the divide between different groups of society (cf. BOBOC/BACIU 2025: 28). On an individual level, political statements are often interpreted in a way that confirms existing prejudices and further strengthens loyalty to a party (ZIMMERMANN/KOHRING 2020: 217).

Understanding which emotions and attitudes right-wing extremists tap into in their communication, and which populist appeals trigger these emotions (cf. WIRZ 2018) is crucial in the fight against right-wing extremism. The increase in the media and communication channels used by populists not only leads to the rapid dissemination of news, but also facilitates rapid mobilization (cf. BENNETT/LIVINGSTON 2018: 128).

Focus on Romania

After the constitutional crisis of 2024 and the rise of pro-Russian candidate Călin Georgescu, the far-right movement in Romania gained strength, as reflected in a significant proportion of far-right and Euro-sceptic seats in parliament. Bălănescu & Petre (2025) emphasize how this political upheaval profoundly changed the country's cultural and media structures. Trust in traditional journalism fell to a record low due to opaque financing and political influence, while independent media came under increased attack from far-right actors. The loss of trust shifted public debate to less regulated social media, which in turn fueled the spread of disinformation. Bălănescu and Petre (2025) argue that independent media are important bulwarks against authoritarianism and extremism, but their influence is being weakened by these attacks.

Romania does not have a strong tradition of isolating the radical right. However, it is worth noting the willingness of some democratic parties, such as the liberal-conservative PNL (Partidul Național Liberal = National Liberal Party), to exclude the AUR (Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor = Alliance for the Union of Romanians), founded in 2019, the ultra-nationalist and Eurosceptic s.o.s. Romania, founded in 2021, and the POT (*Partidul Oamenilor Tineri* = Party of Young People), founded in 2021. The AUR and POT primarily appeal to younger voters; place of residence and income are less decisive than age (BUCCI 2025: 13). In addition, Bucci (2025: 13) believes that the AUR's initially rather vague economic agenda in the last elections was strongly influenced by the libertarian messages of Donald Trump and Elon Musk. s.o.s. Romania is accused of having close ties to Russia. The voices of these political actors have become louder in the Romanian parliament and are damaging Romania's reputation on the European stage (PLESCA/VASILACHE 2024: 90).

In this very tense political context, working conditions for journalists are difficult and their safety is at risk. They are faced with smear campaigns, and Civicus Monitor (2022) reported that the AUR had published a list of »harmful and dishonest media« on its Facebook page. This list included television stations and publications such as Digi 24, Antena 3, Realitatea TV, and *Newsweek*, as well as prominent journalists such as Cristian Tudor Popescu and Lucian Mîndruță. Politically motivated harassment and attacks against journalists are on the rise, especially against those who report critically on right-wing politicians or nationalist groups. Independent and opposition voices are to be discredited and silenced.

Attacks on journalists also originate from supporters of far-right political groups. Civicus Monitor (2025) reports cases in which right-wing demonstrators have attacked or harassed journalists: During a demonstration in Bucharest in early January 2024 against the Constitutional Court's decision to invalidate the 2024 presidential elections, demonstrators vandalized a car belonging to the news channel Antena3-CNN Observator. They tried to puncture the tires and tear

off the license plates. Several journalists were verbally and physically threatened during the same demonstration. Protesters threw pretzels and water bottles at Digi24 reporter Ioana Corneev and a cameraman while they were reporting live on the scene.

On January 24, 2025, journalists and cameramen from Digi24 and Prima TV were again harassed by right-wing extremist pro-Georgescu demonstrators. During a live broadcast, the demonstrators called journalist Valentin Stan a »liar« and prevented the cameraman from continuing to film. A team from Prima TV suffered a similar fate.

Similar scenes unfolded on March 9, 2025. A Digi24 minibus was overturned and severely damaged by pro-Georgescu demonstrators. Violent clashes broke out between the police and Georgescu supporters. On March 10, the public prosecutor's office announced that it had initiated criminal proceedings against four people for disturbing public order.

It is not only supporters of far-right parties who attack journalists; far-right politicians themselves also take action against media representatives. On March 19, 2025, an incident occurred in the parliament building. Journalists wanted to get a statement from Anamaria Gavrilă, the chair of the POT, after she had stopped answering questions for several days, fuelling speculations about her possible withdrawal from the presidential election campaign. According to the official statement, the MP called the police and referred to »verbal differences« with the media. However, law enforcement officers determined that the journalists were performing their work legally and issued a warning to the POT chairwoman. During the confrontation, Gavrilă filmed the media representatives and shouted angrily, »This is the press!« She portrayed herself as a victim of aggressive journalists on Facebook. When the POT chairwoman was approached again by journalists in the corridors of parliament on May 6, 2025, she threatened: »You are a dying breed. I can't wait to see you disappear.«

Journalists are also facing more political pressure in their daily work. Journalist Monica Vasilescu of Realitatea Plus announced her resignation in a Facebook post, citing political pressure as the reason. Vasilescu explained that she had been instructed to refer to Georgescu as »the elected president« in news reports immediately after January 1, 2025, which did not correspond to the political reality. The Realitatea Plus broadcaster contradicted Monica Vasilescu's statements, claiming they only learned of the journalist's decision to resign through her Facebook post. No one had ever forced her to act against her convictions.

To find out how the rise of right-wing extremism in Romania is affecting journalistic practice, we spoke to two experienced journalists: E. C., a journalist at the news portal Digi24.ro, and L. B., a journalist and TV presenter at Prima TV. In their journalistic work, they encounter both politicians from democratic parties and representatives of the far right.

The interviews cover three topics: first, threats to press freedom; second, the relationship between far-right politicians and journalists; and third, the impact on the public. This gave us valuable insights into everyday journalistic life and taught us more about the challenges journalists face in their daily work – from political and economic pressure to verbal attacks and attempts to prevent independent reporting and exclude unpopular journalists.

Both journalists believe that the reputation and credibility of the press are at risk. Citizens' trust in the media is dwindling, and extremist political actors want to eliminate independent, critical journalism. Although this is not explicit censorship, both journalists report attempts to undermine the credibility and truthfulness of the press. Examples include public attacks on media companies and organizations whose journalists ask critical questions, as well as targeted smear campaigns and the spread of conspiracy theories. E. C. illustrates this with a situation she experienced personally: Diana Șoșoacă, the chairwoman of the S.O.S. party, said on Digi24, when the journalist corrected a false claim made by the politician: »Digi24 – those who killed people and forced them to get vaccinated.«

Politicians on the far right often resort to misinformation to discredit the press that is critical of them, both on the spot during interviews and on social media. This lying and twisting of facts impacts the general information climate and constantly puts professional journalism into question, ultimately undermining public trust in the media. This appears to be a calculated move. By discrediting democratic media, far-right actors are driving public and political communication to social media, where they can exercise complete control over the information that is disseminated. In addition, social media algorithms can create echo chambers, radicalizing supporters of far-right parties, as they are no longer confronted with opposing views.

Both interviewees sense the hostile attitude toward journalists. The right-wing extremists see themselves as opponents of the »system« and the »corrupt elite ruling the country« (cf. MUDDE 2007: 5). They present themselves to their supporters and potential voters as the true representatives of the people. Both L. B. and E. C. mention aggressive behavior, verbal attacks, and attempts at intimidation by right-wing extremist politicians. They refuse to answer critical questions and threaten journalists. When journalists try to refute lies – such as the claim that Ukrainian children receive higher subsidies from the Romanian state than Romanian children – far-right MP Diana Șoșoacă does not shy away from asking whether E. C. is »the mistress of Marcel Ciolacu« (former prime minister) in order to discredit her as biased.

A particularly obvious attack on press freedom is the restriction of certain media outlets' access to events or places of public interest. On the evening of the 2025 presidential elections – the most important political event of the

year – George Simion banned journalists from Antena 1, Antena 3 CNN, and G4Media from entering the campaign headquarters. On the other hand, the far right has very good relations with other media outlets, e.g. the broadcaster Realitatea TV, which the National Council for Audiovisual Media has fined several times for spreading false information, including a fine of 200,000 lei on February 26, 2025, and one of 100,000 lei on March 4, 2025, for misinformation. The targeted selection of media partners turns the relationship with the press into a tactical instrument: critical journalists are excluded and attacked, while the obedient press becomes a mouthpiece. The journalists' responses suggest a relationship characterized by rejection, control, and instrumentalization. Journalism can no longer fully perform its mediating role between politics and citizens.

When asked whether the rhetoric and attitude of right-wing extremist politicians in any way affects journalists' courage to ask critical questions and report freely, L. B. replies that the behavior of these politicians actually promotes solidarity among journalists: They have formed a coalition of the press against manipulation, or rather a professional community that shares common values. L. B. emphasizes that the aggressiveness and hostility of right-wing extremist politicians has not led to journalists withdrawing from the public sphere.

With regard to the influence on public opinion, L. B. and E. C. agree that extremist discourse inevitably reaches the public. Social networks play a decisive role in this, as they enable messages to spread quickly and allow attempts at manipulation. E. C. recalls the #echilibrisiverticalitate (#balanceandverticality) campaign, which used bots and managed to get Călin Georgescu to number 9 on the list of political candidates with the most followers on TikTok. This facilitates the creation of a loyal electorate that rejects counterarguments, idolizes far-right politicians, and adopts their statements without verifying, thereby promoting the spread of false information and accusations in these echo chambers (cf. BOBOC/BACIU 2025: 28).

At the same time, the journalists agree that responsible media play an essential balancing role by verifying facts, exposing misinformation, and providing explanations that enable citizens to distinguish between truth and manipulation. Despite these efforts, the interviewees' responses show that the influence of social media is so severe that traditional journalism is constantly struggling to regain lost ground. Both journalists are concerned about the rapid spread of extremist messages via social media and the population's susceptibility to these messages. E. C. claims that online media has become the most important source of information for at least some voters, and L. B. fears that journalists and reputable media outlets will be unable to prevent the spread of messages from right-wing extremist politicians. In addition, both are certain that online media have fundamentally changed the way in which far-right narratives are disseminated and internalized by citizens.

Analysis of the interviews with journalists L. B. and E. C. shows that the relationship between the far-right and the Romania media is characterized by structural tension that extends beyond individual incidents. Both agree that press freedom is not openly restricted, but rather undermined by subtle mechanisms such as manipulation, disinformation, and the discrediting of journalists. The relationship between the far right and the media is hostile: critical publications are excluded and attacked, while media outlets that are subservient to the far right have become propaganda channels. When it comes to influencing the public, both journalists emphasize the central role of social networks in spreading extremist messages and creating echo chambers. However, the interviewees' responses also show resistance: both journalists are not abandoning their critical stance, but are even recognizing a tendency toward professional solidarity in the face of attacks. The general conclusion is that the far right has succeeded in putting pressure on the media and intimidating them. At the same time, this situation has triggered collective resistance from journalists who are trying to consolidate journalism's function as a guardian of democracy by fact-checking and exposing manipulation.

Conclusion

These findings raise the question under which conditions journalism in Romania can continue to fulfill its democratic functions in the future. The importance of independent journalism remains crucial. Especially at a time when automated information systems and disinformation campaigns threaten democratic communication, access to credible news is of central importance (cf. GROSS/SCHULTZ 2025).

Given the current political developments in Romania, growing mistrust of the media, and the omnipresence of far-right narratives, the future of journalism in Romania depends on the ability of media companies and democratic institutions to create robust mechanisms to protect against manipulation and disinformation.

There is a need for clearer regulation of digital communication platforms, particularly with regard to political advertising and combating disinformation on social networks, which have become the most important mobilization tool for the far right. At the same time, strengthening quality journalism requires investment in the professionalization of editorial offices, greater transparency in media financing, and less dependence on political or economic resources. Another essential element is promoting media literacy among citizens to make them more resilient to polarizing narratives. According to Gross/Schultz (2025), prebunking, as a preventive method against misinformation, offers a promising

approach to promoting citizens' media literacy. If these approaches are pursued consistently, the media can fulfill their public role and effectively counteract the radicalization strategies of the far right.

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Focus: Press Freedom and Right-Wing Extremism

Stine Eckert

Journalism in the U.S. in times of crisis

Interview with Jelani Cobb, Dean of the
Columbia Journalism School

On January 20, 2025 Donald Trump was inaugurated for his second term as U.S. president, accelerating his aggressive attacks on journalists and universities, including those with journalism degrees, such as Columbia University. On March 10, Jelani Cobb, the Dean of the Columbia Journalism School and Henry R. Luce Professor of Journalism, gave the 2025 Reuters Memorial Lecture, entitled »Trust issues. Credibility, credulity and journalism in a time of crisis« discussing that journalism has not yet found its footing to report on the Trump administration. In an interview with Wayne State University's journalism scholar Stine Eckert on September 15, Jelani Cobb expounded on the thoughts he shared in the lecture and spoke about how U.S. news media handled the reporting on the killing of the right-wing activist Charlie Kirk and how to cover government in repressive times.

SE: In March, in your Reuters Memorial Lecture, you spoke about trust and journalism in times of crisis, and you said at the beginning of the speech that it was a »developing speech« because so many events in the U.S. are happening at such a fast pace. Now, half a year later, with many events having come and gone again, which additional concerns would you add?

JC: I would add the capitulation of media organizations and law firms, universities, to the belligerence and overreach of the federal government. I would add something about political violence for lots of reasons in the United States. I probably say more about the necessity of us publishing things that are true, even if they're unpopular. And just even in this country in the last week, in the aftermath of Charlie Kirk's murder, people seemed completely unwilling to talk about his

own words, people being castigated for quoting things that he actually said. And so while I agree that it's important for people to maintain a certain kind of decorum when discussing a murder victim, that doesn't preclude you talking about who the person actually was and what they actually said and did. And there was hesitance and reluctance, this actual fearfulness I think about doing that here. I think those are the kind of big things that I would talk about and include.

SE: Are you also meaning the political violence against journalists?

JC: Sure, that as well, and the targeting of journalists, which we've seen happen in Gaza in two separate instances in recent memory, in other instances, likely prior to that. But that's another dynamic that at least in the United States has received scant attention, and it goes to the conversation about credibility and about what people believe our vested interests are, and even internally, being among journalists, our willingness to tell stories about actual journalists being killed.

SE: Have you perhaps added other trainings or workshops to the curriculum for emerging journalists?

JC: No, we've already been teaching about this subject matter. It reinforces the importance of it, I think.

SE: Charlie Kirk was shot fatally on September 10, 2025 and very quickly speculation came up about the perpetrator, even though that person was still on the run. Very quickly also Trump put posts on social media speculating who's to blame, and it was reported in news media. I was wondering if it is problematic to report on that while things are ongoing, and to give these speculations so much room. I was just wondering what you would make of that.

JC: I saw a number of different outlets. One of the first things that stood out to me about the coverage was that it was referred to as an assassination before people knew that it had been done for political reasons, based on what we know now. But if we just had this single incidence, knowing, the kind of contrary fact that often when a high profile political person is attacked physically, whether it be shot or stabbed or harmed in some kind of way, is not done for political reasons, or a very significant amount of the time is done by a person who's unwell, or is done by someone who is motivated to seek fame or glory of some sort. But an assassination implies an explicitly political motive, and you saw headlines that said Charlie Kirk assassinated before we knew anything about the nature of his death. There was speculation that was rampant among irresponsible political actors, and I think that needed to be handled much more delicately than it

generally was. The default was toward the political sensitivities and the emotional sensitivities of people on the right, but it wasn't necessarily toward the ethical responsibility of journalists. So it would not serve anyone's purpose to report on speculation, even if it's done by the president of the United States, speculative statements about who might have done something or why they might have done it. It might be useful to report that the president speculated, but it's not necessarily useful to report who or what they were speculating about.

SE: Why do you think ethical standards for journalism were disregarded in this really fast developing story? Why do you think so much speculation was given so much room?

JC: Fast developing stories require a particular skill set that not all news organizations and not all journalists have. So that's part of it. They should, but not all do, and that's why there's a Pulitzer Prize for Breaking News, for a reason. It is a very specific skill set. The other part, I think, is that, maybe – and this is me speculating – maybe the impact of the attacks on journalism are being felt and people have defaulted to not wanting to upset the administration or the president. That's possible. I don't know that to be true, but it's a possibility. We really would need a kind of postmortem of how this was handled. I think that this would be a really good thing for media organizations to do or kind of media watchdog publications to do in terms of looking at how the coverage has been handled.

SE: How can journalists report on Trump in a way that is sufficiently critical and aggressive in terms of quantity or quality without giving him so much space, without running into the situation that journalists end up spreading falsehoods? How do you navigate that path?

JC: That's entirely individual depending on the publication in terms of how often someone's reporting or what they're reporting. Those are particular editorial decisions that I couldn't dictate. In terms of not reporting falsehoods, you have to point out before you quote an allegation or speculation that there is no basis for this idea. Or you don't report the specifics of the speculation. You could say the president made unfounded comments about the nature of the shooting and leave it at that. And so if people want to go find what those things are, that's what YouTube is for. But you don't have to echo things that are of questionable reliability.

SE: I saw a story in *The New York Times* following the Charlie Kirk story, and they linked to a social media post by Trump. I was thinking they want to be

transparent, linking to the source, but at the same time, what you just said, it may have gone too far. Instead of just stating the president said something about the shooting, and that's it. I was wondering why *The New York Times* made that decision.

JC: Yes, I don't know why the *Times* made the decision. I can't say or speculate about that. I don't know. There's an argument for linking and an argument for not linking. The argument for not linking is that you magnify something that is of questionable veracity. The argument for linking, however, is that you, if you don't link, you don't really have proof that the president said something speculative. I've been a person that said you should show your work, you should show what you're referring to. And so I think the link might actually be a good middle ground where maybe you don't explicitly echo what someone says, but there's a link, and if a person wants to look this up, having already been notified that this is not verified, then that's on them.

SE: But doesn't that also drive traffic to the problematic site?

JC: Possibly, but also it leaves you the kind of the least, worst examples. Do you just tell the public to take your word for it that the president speculated? No, you don't want to do that. Do you want to explicitly echo it? No, you don't want to do that. And so the fact that you drive traffic to it is probably a necessary side effect of trying to create some distance, reiterating something that's a potential false falsehood and leaving the public less informed.

SE: More broadly, we often teach journalism students, that government sources in the past were relatively good sources to cite, that they're generally reliable, but this has now completely changed. How to shift teaching emerging journalists how to deal with government sources. What are you telling journalists?

JC: Well, I don't know that we tell people the government sources are generally reliable. We start with the presumption that a person may be telling you the truth or may not be telling you the truth, and that your job is to verify to the greatest extent possible. Now, of course, there are things that are more or less presumed to be accurate or that the public government is giving the best information possible. If you look at, say, the Bureau of Labor Statistics and their unemployment numbers – that was why the firing of the chief economist there was such a big deal – because those numbers are generally expected to be reflective of how the economy is actually doing. That notwithstanding you report about the report, report about the veracity of the report. If the economy is going to operate on the

presumption that the report is accurate, then you report on that dynamic. What we don't have, or generally presume, is that government information, especially from purportedly non-partisan sources has been skewed in order to serve the purposes of the administration. That's the situation that we're in now.

SE: Another point I wanted to touch on in your memorial lecture is the question of solidarity. You argued that, after there were some incidents where journalists were not allowed to be part of the White House press briefings or couldn't travel with the president, that all journalists collectively should boycott these events. I thought that was a brilliant idea, but I don't think anything like that, even in part, has happened to my knowledge. Maybe I missed something. But what do you think should solidarity look like? And do you think that could happen still?

JC: I don't rule anything out. I think it's possible that this would happen, but I think that we have to have a different kind of consciousness about what the moment calls for. We have to have a different understanding for even what moment we're in. And I think that we're still not quite there, as evidenced by the kind of reaction, the generally cowed reaction that media had to the death of Charlie Kirk. Other instances you could probably cite as well, that we're still operating under the old order, as if this is a normal presidential administration, as if they didn't try to overthrow the government.

SE: What you call the left handed, right handed problem [in your lecture]. Journalists or news media, and we still have not figured out a new *modus operandi* in order to anticipate what's happening and finding a new pattern.

JC: Yes.

SE: I want to turn to journalism education again. The Columbia Journalism School, faculty and alumni, just started a new newsletter, *CollegeWatch*, in September. Is this newsletter also meant to hold your own institution in some way accountable in that ecosystem of higher education for journalism education.

JC: I think that was the whole point. We were trying to report on what was happening at universities as a consequence of the federal overreach. That was a story that wasn't being told, at least not being told comprehensively. We have the money that's disappeared, the repression of particular viewpoints, the incursions into free speech and academic freedom, and all of these dynamics. At best we are getting things from outside the higher education world. So that was what

we were hoping to do. We were thinking that we had to respond to the moment with the skill set that we have. The economics department might respond differently. We had to think about what we could contribute in this moment. And we thought that reporting was the best way.

SE: It's definitely a great resource. Another recent event, also on September 10, *The New York Times* reported that at Texas A&M University a lecturer was fired because a student filmed an exchange with that instructor, in which the student said, the course breaks the law because it has a statement or assumptions that there's more than two genders. How does that impact teaching journalism in the context of culture, race, racism, sexism, etc. What does that mean? How can we not run afoul of these executive orders? Is that maybe Texas specific? I was really rattled by reading that.

JC: That was very particular in a case, in an instance about Texas. But it could be something that could happen other places because Texas represents, on some level, the kind of direction that the federal government has gone in. And so that was very alarming and concerning. What we've seen happen and we're actually pretending that this is not what is happening, is that we're outlawing particular viewpoints. It's not that someone is saying you can't teach something that's factually wrong, which would be a reasonable position to hold, is rather that you can't hold a particular interpretation of facts in the world, and that is, by definition, repressive, and so it's something that we should be very concerned about.

SE: In your lecture, as a path forward, you suggest there should be a »well calibrated skepticism«, and that maybe each significant article should have a complimentary piece that shares how the story was reported to have another level of transparency. Would that warrant creating new positions, such as a transparency editor, or if maybe AI could play a role in that since AI is now thrown into the mix for everything. How does your idea look like in more detail?

JC: I think a transparency editor would be a great idea. AI can probably be useful in this regard although we have to be very careful because AI could further misinform people, and that would not serve anybody's purpose. I think that we just have to be creative in general and we have to be innovative in pushing ourselves to the far extreme of transparency. Anything that we don't have to hold back for the purposes of safety, we should be willing to tell the public.

SE: Thank you for taking the time to update us on your thoughts that you shared in your lecture.

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Research Paper

Siegfried Weischenberg

The flâneur and his ›cannibal interviews‹

On the death of Georg Stefan Troller

He discovered that he was ›born‹ to be a journalist only late in life, after an adventurous youth which had been forced upon the Viennese Jew by the vicissitudes of time. He became a ›media legend‹ primarily through his portraits of people he discovered on the streets of Paris. Georg Stefan Troller, who developed his own style of radio and later television interviewing, died there at the age of 103.

Keywords: Vienna, anti-Semitism, flâneur, interview, *Paris Journal*, self-awareness

The ›flâneur‹ is, as a historical figure, a Parisian invention, so to speak. It is associated with the common perception of a person who wanders aimlessly through the streets and, in particular, the many passages of the French capital, looking here and there, without any particular intentions and, in fact, without any ambition to pick up more than a few random impressions (cf. MÖNNINGER 2004: 73f.). But this underestimates him (as ›flâneur‹ generally refers to men) and ignores his possible intentions, namely to get to know a big city and its inhabitants without any pressure of space or time and to discover things that are hidden from the hurried passerby. »The flâneur is the ultimate inhabitant of the passages, analyzing the city and its inhabitants,« says an essay that identifies Walter Benjamin as the social and cultural scholar who discovered this figure and emphasizes that, in his description of flânerie as an art form, Benjamin mentioned not only the detective but also the journalist (HARTMANN 2006: 299). He writes: »The journalist behaves as a flâneur, as if he too knew this.« Benjamin goes on to say that he »makes it his business to make leisure hours on the boulevard appear as part of it [working time].« (BENJAMIN 1991: 559)

From a German perspective, no one recognized the opportunity to explore the Parisian world as a journalistic ›flâneur‹ with the help of portraits of individuals as well as Georg Stefan Troller. He pursued his calling as an observer of people and discoverer of their secrets until a very advanced age, and then knew how to translate this into an extremely successful television format. As he repeatedly emphasized, his primary focus was always on finding out something about himself; he presented his memories as a *Self-description* [Selbstbeschreibung]. In the expanded new edition, published two decades later, he described what made his ›personal journalism‹ distinctive in very drastic terms as ›cannibalism,‹ in which ›we feed on the warm blood of our prey in order to strengthen ourselves‹. This, he said, was ›the psychological process, whatever protective cloak we may drape over it: that of enlightenment, compassion, or even social reportage‹ (TROLLER 2009: 343).

The French capital Paris had only reluctantly become his second home after the Second World War for the then twenty-something; he actually wanted to return to the Austrian capital of Vienna, where he was born as the second son of a Jewish fur trader from Brno. ›Whether in Berlin, Paris, or New York, I will never be able to feel anything other than Viennese,‹ he confesses at the very beginning of his autobiography. But: ›Like all Viennese, I have always loved Vienna as passionately as I have hated it, which is undoubtedly fruitful. The city I had to leave at the age of seventeen never left me indifferent.‹¹ After three years as a ›traveling fan‹ in the US Army, which fought its way from Italy to France and then to defeated Germany with him as a ›Private Troller‹ (›without having fired a shot‹), he follows in the footsteps of his idol B. Traven. Traveling Latin America without funds, he met a former dermatologist who also came from his father's homeland, and then reported in his memoirs: ›Brno may be a small town, but it is full of geniuses.‹ He gives two examples – and this is not atypical of Troller's fundamentally ironic narrative style: ›One was a Neapolitan folk singer in London. Another was a cowboy in Wyoming.‹ And this chance acquaintance now works as a ›hygiene inspector‹ in Guatemala.

Karl Troller, the father, fails in his attempt to turn his son into a fur trader – and later again when both are living in exile in the USA. At least the son, as a little poet, had written the German-language rhyme on the back of his father's business card: ›If you don't buy Troller furs, you'll freeze to death on the spot.‹ For those sorts of things, the family loved their youngest one. The talented boy is praised by his parents and ›tenderly pinched on the cheek by his various aunts [...] the prerequisite for so many Jewish success stories,‹ writes the later famous television personality. However, his relatives thought he looked ›pronouncedly‹

1 Quotations not accompanied by an exact source reference are all taken from Troller's first memoirs (GEORG STEFAN TROLLER (1988): *Selbstbeschreibung*, Hamburg: Rasch und Röhrling).

Jewish – and this at a time when the highest praise the Viennese could bestow was, »He doesn't look like a Jew.«

But the stupid talk soon turned bitterly serious in Austria. The adolescent had just become a ›Krausian‹, wanting to become an artist like Karl Kraus, when the Austrians hung on the lips of their compatriot Adolf Hitler and cheered him on at the Ring and Heldenplatz by the hundreds of thousands, and even the poets ran over to the ›Third Reich‹ with »their suspenders flying.« And he hears the chant on the radio: »Dear Führer, be so kind and show yourself at the window!« Now he realizes what separates him from the ›Aryans.« It was not religion or race: »What made me different was simply that, for some unfathomable reason, I could not speak this language. This voluptuous, servile bootlicking, kowtowing, parrying, hypocrisy, adulation, zeal, positivity, conformity, wanting to be part of it, having to go along, marching along, shouting along, punishing along, murdering along [...]« It contained everything that ultimately led to catastrophe. »In Leopoldstraße, the ghetto of the poorer Jews, the golden heart of Vienna raged,« he reports. »The agitation turned into a hunt, as Karl Kraus had already noted,« he says. Then, with the annexation of Austria by the German Reich, his whole life changed abruptly. »It was March 11, 1938, the end of my childhood,« he notes laconically.

Soon, he and his family are faced with the question whether or not to leave the Greater German Reich. First, they go to relatives in Brno (Troller with only one book in his luggage – Karl Kraus's *The Last Days of Mankind*), and then soon on to Paris. But the French capital also proved to be a difficult place to live. Soon after the war began, father and son were interned. When a ceasefire was declared after the German invasion, they were threatened with deportation to a concentration camp. But the family managed to flee to the south of France. Father and mother later escaped via Portugal; they were among the last to succeed in fleeing Europe. The son also managed to obtain a visa for the USA in Marseille. His chances of doing so were actually slim, as he was not one of the people eligible for the ›artist emergency visa‹ arranged by Varian Fry, which saved the lives of many well-known German writers and journalists (cf. WITTSTOCK 2024). But once again, Georg Stefan Troller was helped by luck and his father's personal contacts. In addition, the vice-consul in charge was of the opinion that »America needs soldiers.« He had previously asked him if he was a communist. »»Yes, yes!« I shouted enthusiastically, because I didn't understand a word. The vice-consul possessed the most beautiful of all virtues: humor. He laughed and stamped the paradise paper, adding the date: May 12, 1941.« (TROLLER 1988: 126f.)

It took him more than two months to reach New York, after being »stranded: in Casablanca on a coffin ship called Wyoming – where neither Humphrey Bogart nor Ingrid Bergman were waiting at Rick's Café. After a forced stay in a hut camp run by the Foreign Legion, he finally continued his journey on another

ship. At the port, Troller was greeted by a swarm of reporters, who were only interested in celebrities such as Albert Einstein or Arturo Toscanini, or alternatively Golo Mann, the son of the Nobel Prize winner for literature, and Heinrich, his brother. He quickly finds a job, but then ends up in hospital because he contracted paratyphoid fever in Morocco. At least there are »a few white-clad carbolic girls« there, he reports.

Now he makes the acquaintance of emigrants who were big names in Germany but have to settle for much less here professionally. Of course, there are also impostors among them, who are exposed with the following anecdote: »Two dachshunds meet on Amsterdam Avenue. One says to the other: ›You know, over in Europe I was a St. Bernard.«« He now tries his luck along these lines at the famous exile newspaper *Aufbau*, which prefers to print essays by famous German-speaking authors such as Thomas and Heinrich Mann, Feuchtwanger, Werfel, Mehring, Kesten, and Polgar. But since he had »never hatched a line of journalism,« he was turned away by the bouncer. An attempt at the afternoon paper *PM*, the favorite newspaper of New York intellectuals, also fails, he ends up working as a »bookbinder at the machine [...] roughly the shabbiest job New York had to offer.« The 20-year-old did not see himself as an exile and claimed that he never used the word: »Far too highbrow a term for our undignified expulsion,« he said. Unlike well-known figures such as Bertolt Brecht, people like him felt that expulsion was something final and irrevocable, »without it helping us much in finding our identity.« On the one hand, he feels that he should actually be »bursting with bliss« at being »saved and in the USA.« On the other hand, however, he feels alienated in the New World, where »something like the totalitarianism of conformity« prevails.

At this point, he only wants to learn a little English to earn a living. Like the other emigrants with Jewish roots, he confesses: »My language remained German.« The German of Karl Kraus's *Last Days* – which he had internalized so thoroughly that he lost his few friends »out of sheer verbal aggression.« »After that, I put Kraus aside for years,« he reports, »and became almost a tolerable person!« He openly admits: »I can't remember being very concerned about the fate of European Jewry in New York.« Pearl Harbor, the Japanese attack on the American Pacific Fleet stationed in Hawaii, changed everything for Georg Stefan Troller – three days before his twentieth birthday. This relieved him of long-delayed decisions that affected his future life: »The most convenient solution and one of the reasons for the universal popularity of wars,« he soberly notes. The young man is certain »that the us Army could not do without me in the long run.«

But another year passes before he is drafted. After learning the basics of warfare from one of the typical drill sergeants and proving himself in kitchen duty, he is still not sent to the front. What is going on? He is mistrusted because he jokingly told a comrade that he was a personal friend of Adolf Hitler; this is

now on file. Once that was cleared up, a colonel declared him ›fit for overseas service‹ – and he first went ashore in Casablanca, which he knew well from his journey into exile. But: ›I had left the old world as Kafka's dung beetle, and I returned as Gary Cooper.‹ His ›highly personal reconquest‹ had begun. In the US Army, he first learns what role Black people are allowed to play here. They are generally only employed as cooks, drivers, and supply personnel because, as he ironically notes, ›America sees them as born service providers.‹

Soon he is off to Italy, arriving in Naples, where Troller finds himself in a situation with long-term consequences: thanks to his language skills, he is assigned to the team that interrogates German and Austrian prisoners of war in the ›Prisoner Cage.‹ Here he learns how to get information out of people who want to hide something. ››Come on, spill it, man,‹ I say, and he unflinchingly gives me everything he has inside him.‹ With some experience, Troller finds out which method is the most successful. ›This ›interview technique,‹ based on the empathetic, perhaps more feminine part of my nature, will serve me well,‹ he writes in retrospect. In the process, he also learns how well the reduction of cognitive dissonance already works among the defeated enemies: ›There are no Nazis. There are no concentration camps. There is no SA, no SS, no Gestapo, and no party with ranks and divisions. It's all nonsense.‹ Such ignorance outrages Troller, a Jew who was forced to leave his home: ›I feel cheated of my hatred.‹ What he experienced was ›not only embarrassing for the Krauts,‹ he thinks, ›but also for me‹ – since he learned that he was dealing with ›compliant sycophants.‹ After months of fighting, the American army finally achieves a breakthrough at Monte Cassino in the spring of 1944, at about the same time as the invasion of Normandy. Gradually, the end of World War II is in sight, even though the German army continues to fight fiercely. Troller now lands in France and first conquers the beach at Saint Tropez, where this time no one asks him for a stamp or visa, as he notes with relief. In the meantime, his ›feel for language‹ has changed: ›I don't need your damn language anymore,‹ he writes to the Germans, ›or only for domestic use, to finish you off,‹ he adds. ›For I belong to the language of the victors! Yes, that's it. American triumphs over German, that will be the net gain of the war. This smooth, democratic monosyllabic language over your brittle, twisted, and mendacious idiom.‹

Then he continues north at ›blitzkrieg speed,‹ where, as always, women line his path. So it is not only Strasbourg that is being conquered. And then he also conquers a Leica camera that a sleeping German private is wearing around his neck. This makes Georg Stefan Troller a man of images who, as always, ironically admits: ›Like many soldiers, when not directly involved in dying, I loved war. War is the continuation of youth by other means.‹ He sends the newspaper *PM* a short story about a reconnaissance unit he led, for which he receives a check. But the paper closes down before the story appears: ›That delayed my first printing

experience by unbearable months[...].« Despite the camera he snatched from the enemy, it is too late for a career as a war photographer. But Troller travels around taking rather abstract-looking pictures of the aftermath of the war, such as »twisted railroad tracks.« He is unable to secure a job as a news cameraman, but at least he gets one as an interpreter for an American newsreel team. This even earns him a brief appearance in a documentary film.

By chance, he meets the school janitor from his high school days in Vienna, who, a Nazi through and through, had bullied one of his teachers at the time. In return, he now makes him clean a filthy toilet. Once again, during an interrogation, he experiences how willingly informants in the last days of the war reveal what they know about their actions. »That was the flip side of German supremacism,« he concludes. »The pedantry of a job well done became an end in itself.« This is how he explains »the lack of remorse shown by so many accountable leaders.« Specifically, he names generals, party bosses, industrialists, lawyers, and doctors, »right down to the Barbies and Eichmanns.« His list is completed by journalists. When he then carelessly attempts to cross the Rhine in a rubber dinghy as part of an advance guard near Worms, he is drawn into the war after all. He is shot at from the other bank. »At me! Even though I wasn't involved in the war at all, just an innocent spectator!«

Twenty years after the publication of his autobiography, a journalist asks him the cunning question of whether, without the hard lessons he had learned and now come to terms with, he would have become »just an unremarkable, run-of-the-mill journalist.« Troller responds very seriously and elaborates: »It was always about the fact that emigration means a loss of identity. That after years of losing your identity and being driven around, you no longer know who you are, what you are entitled to in this world. The feeling of not being entitled to anything ... Fear of life, isolation, withdrawal – that was the totally negative prerequisite for what I later became. Because I had to fill this tremendous emptiness, this lack of self-esteem, somehow.« (MISCHKE 2009)

Now in his mid-twenties, Troller wants nothing more to do with the difficult business of »denazification« and joins Radio Munich, »where I became founding member number seven of what would later become Bayerischer Rundfunk, just like Hitler was for the German Workers' Party.« He gets the job because he can answer the trick question about the name of the American vice president during the job interview. The »re-education of the Germans,« the major Allied project of those days, was limited to short political commentaries, reports the journalistic newcomer. He dislikes the fact that Radio Munich is quickly turning into a popular entertainment station »with music and hullabaloo;« so he looks for a more sophisticated alternative. He finds it at the *Neue Zeitung* in Schellingstraße, in Munich's district Schwabing, where the former printing site of the *Völkischer Beobachter* had been located. He actually wanted to join the arts section

with the famous writer Erich Kästner, but at that time only »savvy writers« were accepted. So he remained a reporter, »a job for which I was ill-suited due to my lack of precise observational skills,« he admits, hiding his light under a bushel. However, he did not stay at the renowned newspaper for very long. Although he actually had everything he needed, he waited for what he called »a call.« Like many ex-emigrants, he now missed the »satisfying feeling of homecoming. Of return. Of a new beginning, no, of rebirth.« Even more ambitious: »In principle, a new Troller had to emerge from the new Germany.« So he takes a month's vacation and hitchhikes with a friend to the place where he never wanted to be again: his hometown of Vienna, which is then controlled by the Soviets. But in Austria, he falls into »a bottomless hole of regression.« In Vienna, he finds St. Stephen's Cathedral burned out, as well as the opera house and the Burgtheater. In search of lost time, he roams the city, visiting the places of his youth.

Now he settles scores with his old homeland, listing compatriots who »were vastly overrepresented in the Nazi party. Also in the SS. Also in the Gestapo. And among the Gauleiters and Reich Commissioners.« People like Kaltenbrunner and Höß, the commander of Auschwitz, as well as Seidl, the commander of Theresienstadt, and Brunner, who had sent the last Viennese Jews there. Finally, »the Austrian by choice, Eichmann, who had crafted the ›final solution of the Jewish question.«« Troller finds the formula for what had happened: »The Germans, it was said, became anti-Semites because they were Nazis. With the Austrians, it was the other way around.« Now he notes that people are trying to sweep it all under the rug: »A coalition of silence.« It worked for decades. Soon he returns to Munich to the *Neue Zeitung*, whose editor-in-chief Hans Wallenberg deserves credit for discovering Troller. Wallenberg wanted him to write ›personality stories‹ because he recognized this as his young colleague's particular strength. Troller remained in this genre for his entire journalistic career. »I reported on every person as if they were a character in a play or film. They ›fit,‹ they ›worked out,‹« he writes in retrospect. »My interviews took the form of dialogues, my reports were screenplays.« He adds confidently: »I didn't care much whether the people involved recognized themselves in them.«

But soon he interrupts his promising journalistic career and returns to the US, initially for the purpose of being discharged from military service. Now his father, who has remained in New York, presents him with his old favorite idea for his son's future: to try his luck in the fur industry (or alternatively in »ready-to-wear clothing«). Georg Stefan Troller quickly took off and invested the \$10,000 he was entitled to as a war veteran in a college education in faraway California. While hitchhiking west, he was once picked up by movie star Hedy Lamarr, who was considered the most beautiful woman in the world at the time. Of course, he knew that she had become famous for her nude appearance in the silent film *Ecstasy*, but he actually knew her from Vienna, when she had still been called

Kiesler. He begged her for three autographs, which he was able to exchange for one from his idol, the Austrian soccer god Matthias Sindelar. She, however, no longer wanted to be reminded of those years: »Film stars had no past back then, certainly not a Jewish one!« Troller now experiences a completely different, easier life, and he loves »this hedonistic fool's paradise.« He has long since abandoned his post-war plan to become a completely new person and now follows the mantra »Be who you are.« In the Californian sun, his goal is to »let himself live« – preferably with movie starlets, who, of course, turn out to be waitresses. The only thing missing for his complete bliss is an open convertible. That's what Troller dreams of after all the traumas of the past years.

He eagerly soaks up the knowledge that the liberal arts have to offer, enjoys life, and then moves north to Berkeley University in San Francisco. He gets there by Greyhound bus via Carmel, which many years later became famous thanks to its mayor, Clint Eastwood. On the way there, he hardly notices the beautiful landscape because he is reading Joseph Roth's novel *Radetzky March*. »An author,« he admits, »whom I could easily have encountered in Vienna, Prague, and later in Paris, but about whom I knew nothing else.« After graduating, he sets off for the south with almost no money (80 dollars), a trip that Troller describes almost in the form of a road movie. He prepared himself by taking a university seminar on D. H. Lawrence, which paid off when he later met Lawrence's colorful widow Frieda, née von Richthofen, in New Mexico and experienced her in all her quirkiness. And by studying the legendary author B. Traven, whose book *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* was currently being filmed in Mexico by John Huston with Humphrey Bogart in the lead role. He wants to track Traven down because he is supposedly involved in the film project as a consultant. But he soon gives up the hunt for his idol because he realizes: »I was not a ›gifted researcher‹ like Gerd Heidemann, the Traven researcher for *stern*-magazine (and inventor of its Hitler diaries).« Years later, he visits Traven's widow in Mexico City. This time, he continues on to Guatemala, where a false friend steals his Leica and all his films. But he quickly comes to see this loss as a relief, because now he can truly open his eyes to his travel adventure and is no longer inhibited by the mania of »photographing everything to prove my cosmopolitanism, not forgetting depth of field and parallax.«

Now he can give free rein to his urge to explore the world as a flâneur. But this journey is also a trip of self-discovery; he has to admit to himself that so far he has only really managed to survive. He realizes that, unlike the adventure heroes he admires, he lacks the courage to do the unconditional. »I only gave guest performances,« he admits to himself, »played roles.« And then come the decisive sentences that foreshadow the rest of his life: »What I never wanted to become turned out to be my main talent. I was born to be a journalist. And I could only hope to combine this profession with something that would satisfy

my wandering desires and imaginations.« This hope was soon fulfilled. First, he, who had no papers other than his student ID, had to get out of Guatemala. He made up a story and managed to get the »straightforward us consul« in the capital to stamp a paper for his departure and lend him twenty dollars, »against the sacred promise to pay it back immediately. I had every intention of doing so, and I still do today,« he stresses. Back in New York, he learns that there is now a Fulbright scholarship that allows him to study comfortably in England or France. He applies for Paris, »but basically I wanted to go somewhere else.« Namely, to his hometown of Vienna, »because I obviously hadn't had enough of that city yet.« He puts forward a philosophical reason for this, so to speak: »It is always the unloved and the unloved that entices us most.«

In Southampton, he sees his older brother Herbert again after many years, who had survived the Nazi era in England. Of course, the younger brother has a lot to report. »I tell exaggerated anecdotes from my current biography, which he laughs at, slightly absent-minded.« Only sometimes did his brother complain that what he was selling him as the truth couldn't be entirely true. His reaction: »That upsets me, because I'm not going to let myself be pinned down by idiotic details.« After all, he had kept a diary since his days as a soldier on the front, as he revealed many years later in an interview. Such notes, which the US soldier wrote in German, were strictly forbidden at the time because of the danger of betraying secrets. Finally, the Fulbright scholarship is approved – not for Vienna, but for Paris. There is no point in arguing. This changes everything – fortunately for him – also because he still basically views the Austrians as the worst, in any case unteachable and unconvertible Nazis.

At the Sorbonne in Paris, he quickly finds a doctoral supervisor. The only catch: the German studies professor expects a dissertation of 1,000 pages and a »short thesis« of about 300 pages. This ought to take three to four years. Troller calculates that he will be over 30 by the time he submits the manuscript, which no one will ever read anyway. »After that, I never set foot in the Sorbonne again.« The university only gets a hold of him when he secures the scholarship dollars. Now he devotes himself entirely to journalism and women – including those who stroll between the Opera and the Madeleine. »Soon I knew the whole Left Bank without anyone knowing me: a fence-sitter in Paris.« The »being recognized« would later change; what now becomes and remains truly virulent is the »flâneur Troller.« It all began with the medium of radio and the popular US program Answer Men, which he was tasked with adapting for Austrian listeners. They were to submit all kinds of questions, which were then answered on the microphone. So much for the theory. In practice, virtually none of the real questions made it into the program, Troller reports. »The real questions dealt entirely with the eternal themes of money, love, and hair loss,« he adds. In addition, there were fictional questions about brand-name products to satisfy the interests

of the sponsors. That's not a winner in the long run. What's more, »what the owner of the program, Mrs. Madison – an American lesbian of Catcher proportions – didn't consider, was the confusion of European languages. Instead of one program, she has a dozen on her hands.«

The show is basically worthless, but it leads to a transformation in him – not into a beetle, as in Kafka, but into the media professional he perhaps always wanted to be: »The last traces of the whiny emigrant fell away from me, and another began to emerge: the hands-on, worldly reporter.« But he immediately qualifies this: »Half bluff, half authentic.« Now financially secure, he buys the convertible he has long dreamed of – a two-seater 1932 Chrysler that looked like a Ferrari and made a similar noise. And now he dares to get married: to an Englishwoman. Sports cars remain a constant in his later life: »Once I start driving a four-door car, I'll be finished for good,« he realizes. Professionally, he benefits from the fact that America is becoming more and more interested in Europe (more precisely: in its resurgent markets there), so that the new radio program Report from Europe quickly finds many takers in the us: a hundred radio stations.

Georg Stefan Troller is now truly in his element – and discovers that interviewing is his true domain. »I learned,« he reports, »that with research, empathy, and a sense of rhythm and theatricality, it could be turned into a small work of art.« And he learned »to talk about myself indirectly through others. That was actually forbidden; objectivity was the order of the day in the 1950s.« His motto now is: »To hell with objectivity! And with all the rules that are presented to us as irrefutable.« At this point in his autobiography, he reveals almost all the secrets of his (interview) work, which soon becomes his trademark. This includes what he calls »reversed vanity«: »I *created* the event, but pretended that I had stumbled upon it quite by accident. I *conducted* the interview, but attributed everything to the brilliance of my counterpart.« But he immediately qualifies this: »I can't claim that I was a journalist with heart and soul, though. After all, the body had to make a living.« That's why he stands with his microphone in front of the Élysée Palace and the celebrity hangout Elysée-Matignon, observing, gossiping, and selling: »Politicians, couturiers, chanson singers, cineastes, actors, hookers, and the ›man on the street.« Basically, this is the same clientele that he later portrays in his *Paris Journal*, now with the support of the camera.

After the Hungarian uprising, »which changed my perspective,« he began to incorporate political events more strongly into his journalistic work. He thought about the Austro-Hungarian past of his homeland and his relatives who came from the eastern part of the former Danube Monarchy. He realized that journalism could only be a satisfying profession if one was committed to it. But what for? This was not an easy question, especially in the 1950s. In any case, he decided that he should »somehow become a participant rather than an observer.« »Find

enthusiasm again. Something that (but was there such a thing?) connected journalism with my inner life.« French politics and its protagonists were out of the question, that much was clear to him. »De Gaulle aroused my discomfort, unlike my colleague Scholl-Latour,« who later became studio manager in Paris. »To this day, I distrust all collective and revivalist movements,« he adds. »I saw him as a Dollfuß, an authoritarian Maxi-Metternich.« De Gaulle also despised the media, he says.

During these years, Troller produced radio plays on an assembly line and earned a lot of money. He benefited from the fact that people in post-war Germany were increasingly interested in what was happening in their neighboring country. And the freelance Paris correspondent delivered. His »subjects« included inventors of private submarines, imaginative architects, poetic prodigies, open-air painters whose works were not directly »suitable for radio,« and clochards »whose burps were at least audible.« He finds himself at car shows, art salons, and fortune-teller salons, at premieres, midinette days, and at the black nights at Pigalle. But that's not all: »I know all the chanson singers, from Chevalier and Piaf to Aznavour and Brel. All the fashion designers from Dior to Chanel and Cardin. All the painters from Utrillo and Braque to Dali and Chagall.« He turns all these topics and people into four- to five-minute radio pieces, including interviews. Troller estimates that he has produced 2,000 reports over the years. He has long been considered a specialist in »all things Parisian.« Meanwhile, the flâneur is once again capturing what he sees in photographs, having bought a new Leica in Munich. »I am the visual chronicler of a dying Paris,« he says, »the remains of which (in the Latin Quarter, in the Marais) will be preserved in aspic for a lot of money twenty years from now.«

But Troller only realizes with some delay that interest in his radio reports is waning. »The fact that I eventually went into television was solely due to the fact that it came to me,« he reports. Südwestfunk, which was responsible for France at the time, was looking for someone to cover the neighboring country – initially without a budget or an office. Troller, who is immediately hooked and from that moment on no longer touches his camera for professional purposes, now throws himself wholeheartedly into the new medium of television. He feels at home here from the start because everything seems to fit. He can apply everything he has learned and experienced. This adds up to a diverse list: »Art. Posters. Crafts. Theater and cinema. Journalism. Radio. Poetry recitation. And photography. And Paris.« He feels that his »mixed background« makes him perfect for this »mixed medium of television.« He immediately demonstrates what he understands by new standards for the visual medium – he shows excerpts from a press conference given by de Gaulle that consist solely of facial expressions and gestures as well as constructed text. The production is linked to his first live appearance on television, but pretty much everything goes wrong. Afterwards,

however, he has a relieving experience with the »TV audience.« Outside the studio in Baden-Baden, from where the program was broadcast, a man approaches him and says: »But you're the ... we just saw you on TV ... no, what a coincidence, what luck!«

However, he not only learns how quickly one can become popular through this medium, but also that it creates unfamiliar pressure – especially when private problems are added to the mix. An early midlife crisis: »Frustrated ambition. A marriage that was falling apart. Now I was also overcome by the ›green-eyed demon,‹ sexual jealousy.« He swallows a whole tube of sleeping pills and, like Stefan Zweig in exile in Brazil a decade and a half earlier, writes a suicide note. But Georg Stefan Troller is saved and, after having his stomach pumped, wakes up in a Paris hospital, »dazed but in high spirits,« he recalls. »Of course, that's when things really took off. All you have to do is show life its downside, and it comes crawling back.« And indeed it did, in the form of the show *Paris Journal*, which Westdeutscher Rundfunk, now responsible for France, had launched. After the first few episodes, which were moderately successful, he was offered the job. That's his thing. »I was tireless. I became the Paris Journal.« But he still had a lot to learn in order to be able to create the »colorful potpourri« he had in mind: »People with stories that all had something to do with Paris. Parisian stories. Finally, I could get rid of the Paris that was rumbling in my gut.« It caught on and took off, »with a vehemence that is incomprehensible to me today,« he says with the benefit of hindsight.

After a few years, Troller compiled what he had achieved and how it had come about, who he had interviewed, and what constituted his »French feeling« in a »book for enthusiasts and insiders.« Its title was that of the program and, with its expert tips, served also as a Paris city guide for many Francophiles (cf. TROLLER 1966). For the show *Paris Journal*, he received the first of around forty awards, including two Golden Nymphs from Monte Carlo and various Adolf Grimme Prizes, as well as an Oscar nomination for *Welcome in Vienna*, the third part of his escape story, which was based on a collaboration with the Viennese director Axel Conti. The film ran for eighteen months in the cinemas of his second home, Paris, where it became something of a cult film, Troller recounts with justified pride. »So I was famous,« he notes with satisfaction. Sometimes, of course, he is confused with his studio manager »Doctor Scholl-Latour,« who is much more visible on television, while Troller only allows himself to be filmed from behind during interviews. Even in his approximately 170 documentaries, he has only endeavored to be thematically present without appearing in the picture himself. Troller obviously does not seek the limelight, does not want to be a »dandy for intellectuals,« even though he was initially considered a »celebrity hunter.« But it is precisely in this area that he considers himself useless, leaving the »chasing« to his energetic and brilliantly networked assistant, a Parisian, because he

considers himself far too shy for it. In addition, he claims that he has never really cared much for celebrities, as they are usually quite unproductive in interviews.

In the long run, he also finds it less and less enjoyable to be »praised as the inventor of television feature programs.« So he looks for new challenges and finds them at newly founded, national public broadcaster Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF) in Mainz, Germany, which he had previously only known from postcards. His new program is called *Personenbeschreibung* (Person Description), which he continues to produce from Paris, where Peter Scholl-Latour is once again working as studio manager, now for ZDF. The secretary in charge, Kirsten (»a blonde creature from Hamburg«) became his second wife. With the format, he was now able to practice television as a collaborative effort and produce programs that he himself enjoyed. »They called it ›positive,‹« he reports, »which is probably because I have a rather negative attitude.« And then he repeats the purpose of the format, as he would later do in numerous interviews: »People pointed to its ›life advice,‹ and that seems to me to be based on the fact that it represents my private survival guide.« In doing so, he only asks »questions that I need to know myself,« as he did with the *Paris Journal*, which he now remembers with mixed feelings. In an interview many years later, he even says: »With the *Paris Journal*, I received many letters, including expressions of affection. And then I said to myself, I might as well produce quality. And not this crap of the *Paris Journal*.« (SMOLTZYK/GROS 2021)

However, this was probably not meant entirely seriously, because in his latest book, entitled *Meine ersten 100 Jahre* (My First 100 Years), which contains »New Stories and Reports« (subtitle), he once again devotes an anecdotal review to fifty episodes over a period of about ten years. In it, he reveals that he had only accepted the offer to take over the format, which had been in existence for several months, due to special circumstances at the time. The filmmaker who had been responsible for it had »once disposed of his program's petty cash in a rather personal manner (I think he spent it all in one night at the Pigalle).« Now WDR entrusted the journal, conceived as a »cinematic description of the city,« to a correspondent who had made a name for himself as a flâneur in Paris since his radio days and immediately decided »on gut instinct [...] not to show postcard Paris, but the real life of its inhabitants.«

This seemed an unusual approach at a time when, according to Troller's observation, the new medium of television was primarily understood in Germany as an »educational medium [...] a kind of finishing school for girls with prescribed emotions. How it got on my nerves, this sudden standing to attention in front of benevolence!« Today, this approach is called »political correctness« – and Troller clearly has no interest in that either. »My Paris,« he says of his »counter-concept,« was to be characterized by a camera »that pushed its way everywhere.« And above all: »A reality that denied or hid nothing.« Accompanied by

a text »that had to be a slap in the face to what was common on television at the time – feuilletonistic, ironic, caustic, self-referential, sophisticated. In other words: ›Jewish‹.« (TROLLER 2021: 84f.) This program bore the signature of the flâneur Georg Stefan Troller.

Probably none of the journalistic memoirists has revealed the secrets of his work as generously as this TV celebrity. Like hardly anyone else, he loved to talk and write about journalistic work – there are hardly any professional secrets left to discover in his case. Over the years, Troller became noticeably estranged from developments in real-life journalism. In an interview, he complained that the press did not represent public opinion. He said it now saw itself »as a kind of public educator, but the masses, with their prejudices and fears of immigrants and refugees, which are not heard in the press, do not feel represented, and certainly not in parliament or in government.« He recognized earlier than others: »There are silent majorities coming our way that we have no idea about because they never appeared in the press.« In his later years, Georg Stefan Troller spoke with journalists from time to time – especially when he published another book after his many films. On these occasions, he varied what he had already written in his memoirs: about humans as hybrid beings, about coincidences in his life that led him to journalism, about the German-Austrian past, and, in particular, about asking the right questions in interviews.^[2]

Since his *Selbstbeschreibung*, it had become a central concern for Troller to reveal the structure of his interviews, which had made him famous. He had conducted more than a thousand of them and now made a fine distinction between two categories: »On the one hand, the brisk cross-examination, where you use sharp questioning and provocation to get the bigwigs out of their well-rehearsed routine in order to pinpoint their true strengths and weaknesses.« But he himself prefers a different kind of interview: »One where you unconsciously suggest to your partner that you understand them. That you accept them. That you like them, even love them. That they can open up to you as an equal. That you see them as they see themselves.« And if you meet them on equal terms, there is a chance they will want to reveal everything about themselves. »Even things they didn't necessarily want to reveal, and especially those things.« Troller knew from experience that this kind of thing does not work

»with bluffing (or only a little), but you have to actually feel it [...] Then you're in business.

Not only are you in business, but you've also gained something for yourself, because in

2 See VIOLA GRÄFENSTEIN: Ein gutes Interview ist wie eine gute Beichte. Der Österreicher Georg Stefan Troller kam durch Zufall zum Journalismus, in: *DJVN RW Journal* 2017/01, pp. 16-18 and: CLAUDIA TIESCHKY/HANS-JÜRGEN JAKOBS: »In mir bleiben alle Fragen offen«. Filmemacher Georg Stefan Troller über Deutschland, Suche nach Identität, den Papst und die Kunst des Interviews, in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, April 23/24, 2005, p. 20; YVONNE AEBERSOLD: Dann sind wir Helden, aber erst dann. Von einem, der die Bilder liebt, seine Sprache verlor und auszieht, die Menschen, die Menschen mit Fragen zu fangen, in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, May 27, 2005, p. 40.

these conversations, you also have to reveal all kinds of things about yourself. You are a gangster and a prostitute, a banker and a boxer, a heretic and a mystic all rolled into one. You discover that you have all these things, and infinitely more, within you. Through your questions, you find out a lot about yourself, not necessarily flattering things.«

In his later years, Georg Stefan Troller described and explained in various interviews how his »cannibalism« worked and why he had conducted conversations with more or less prominent figures as a kind of self-awareness trip. By revealing his methods so candidly and unveiling the secrets of his work, he was also a kind of Edgar Allan Poe of journalism.

In a conversation with two journalists, which was printed on two pages in the national weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*, the now 102-year-old repeated in other words what had driven him in his »cannibalism«: »Making a film about another person meant being allowed to fall in love with that person. And it was an invitation to my counterpart and the audience to love me.« He then asks his interlocutors (one of whom is Harald Wieser, who once disenchanted German TV star Werner Höfer because of his Nazi past) whether it is even permissible to say this out loud. Georg Stefan Troller once again defends himself against the prejudice that he filmed so much with celebrities: »That's nonsense. I was always much more interested in the weak and the outcasts.« He approached idealists with mistrust: »Because behind idealism, there is often something completely different hiding. An idealist is always also an illusionist. I was one myself.« Over time, he had to learn that this was also nonsense. So he went from being a »stupid illusionist to a realist.« That is another reason why he is at peace with himself. »Somehow, I always slipped through,« he notes gratefully. »Really often in my life.« At the end, his interviewers quote Charlie Chaplin, who said when he was approaching 90 that, after a certain age, even joy hurts. Does he agree? Troller's answer: »The older I get, the more positively I view the world, despite all the gloom. All in all, you could say that I started out as a pessimist and, after overcoming a thousand obstacles, became an optimist. I don't think that's a bad conclusion.« (quoted in AISSLINGER/WIESER 2024: 42)

Those who met Georg Stefan Troller in person were surprised if they had expected a tall man with a pronounced ego – as is characteristic of many TV celebrities. With his ponytail, which he wore into his eighties, he appeared petite, reserved, and almost shy, but extremely friendly, observing his surroundings with curious eyes. He died in Paris on September 27, 2025. He would have turned 104 on December 10.

This obituary is an abridged and slightly modified version of a portrait that, along with 40 other descriptions of individuals, is included in the author's new book on German-Jewish »media legends,« which will be published shortly by Herbert von Halem Verlag, SIEGFRIED

WEISCHENBERG (2025): *Schuld und Geheimnis. Bekenntnisse von Legenden in der deutsch-jüdischen Publizistik. Cologne: Herbert von Halem.*

About the author

Dr. Siegfried Weischenberg (*1948) started out as a journalist before moving to academia. After a professorship in journalism at the University of Dortmund (1979-1982), he was appointed to chairs at the University of Münster (1982-2000) and the University of Hamburg (2000-2014) to teach communication studies and media sociology.

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Books

Martina Thiele / Boris Romahn

Must read: Books by journalists

The idea of presenting books by journalists to an interested specialist audience originated at the Vienna Institute for Journalism and Communication Studies. In 2002, Hannes Haas and Wolfgang R. Langenbucher put the idea into practice and published short reviews in the journal *message*, and later in the magazine *Der österreichische Journalist*. After Hannes Haas' death in 2014, Fritz Hausjell took over. Since 2020, *Journalism Research* has been the place where books by journalists that are worth reading are discussed.

Now, five years later, it is time for another change. Although the publication location remains *Journalism Research*, and the book journalism project is still an Austrian-German one, but with Martina Thiele (University of Tübingen) and Boris Romahn (University of Salzburg) now at the helm, two avid readers, who, on the one hand, want to continue promoting books written by journalists, but on the other hand, are less competitive and will therefore dispense with the term »Top Ten« in the future. After all, it is not about ranking and who occupies first or tenth place, but about making 10 books, whether specialist books or fiction, better known with each new issue of *Journalism Research* and providing an initial well-founded and at the same time subjective assessment and reading recommendation. In this respect, we are continuing the great work of Hannes Haas, Wolfgang Langenbucher, and Fritz Hausjell, and we would like to express our sincere thanks to them for their passion, love of reading and writing, and their ongoing interest in book journalism and what we write about it in *Journalism Research*.

We are MT and Bro. You can tell who wrote each brief review by these initials. We hope you enjoy the reading, and we look forward to your feedback and encourage you to send us review copies!

Here are our first 10 book reviews:

Paul Lendvai (2025): *Wer bin ich? Über die Identität* [Who am I? On identity]. Vienna: Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 123 pages, 25.95 euros.

The factual answer to the question posed by the great Austrian publicist in his latest autobiographical book is: Hungarian, Austrian, staunch European. Born in 1929 in the Kingdom of Hungary under Admiral Horthy, Lendvai narrowly escaped the Holocaust. Communist Hungary after 1945 offered him no home either. Like so many others, Lendvai decided to go to Vienna after the suppression of the 1956 uprising. There he edited the *Europäische Rundschau* for 47(!) years *and* wrote numerous books and journalistic articles as a defender of liberal democracy. Although there are already autobiographical works by Paul Lendvai, he hopes that his search for his identity »between Austria and Hungary, Judaism and Europe in the mirror of recent events« will »not be boring and perhaps even instructive for younger generations« (p. 14).

This is especially true for readers »with a migration background.« For what Lendvai brilliantly describes is the feeling of belonging and yet remaining a stranger; it is a story of inclusion and exclusion that is well worth reading albeit more interesting for those who, like Lendvai, are Austrian and European and who recognize the names of the nearly two hundred writers, journalists, and politicians listed in the index. (MT)

Volker Resing (2025): *Sein Weg zur Macht. Die Biografie* [His path to power. The biography]. Freiburg, Basel, Vienna: Herder, 224 pages, 22 euros.

Mariam Lau (2025): *Merz. Auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Mitte* [Merz. In search of the lost center]. Berlin: Ullstein, 336 pages, 24.99 euros.

Robin Alexander (2025): *Letzte Chance. Der neue Kanzler und der Kampf um die Demokratie* [Last chance. The new chancellor and the fight for democracy]. Munich: Siedler, 384 pages, 25 euros.

No sooner has Friedrich Merz been elected chancellor after two attempts than the first books by journalists are already available about »his path to power« (Volker Resing), his »fight for democracy« (Robin Alexander) or Merz »in search of the lost center« (Mariam Lau). All three are renowned political journalists and write for the newspapers *Die Zeit* (Lau) and *Die Welt* (Alexander), and the magazine *Cicero* (Resing). The latter has also written a biography about Angela

Merkel. Resing quotes the former chancellor, who responded to *Der Spiegel's* question about Merz's character by saying, »Anyone who has come this far must have certain qualities that enable them to do so.« Resing is certain: »Chancellor Merz will be different from the Merz we have known so far.« (p. 216)

Mariam Lau makes it clear in her introduction: »This is not a biography. I have pursued the questions that interest me about Friedrich Merz without regard to chronology or completeness.« Lau therefore asks, for example: »Does Friedrich Merz have a problem with women?« She discussed this with the chancellor's wife, Charlotte Merz, among others.

And Robin Alexander, in addition to his many appearances on political talk shows, still finds time to portray Friedrich Merz as the savior of democracy. Not only must he oppose autocrats in foreign policy, but in domestic policy, too, only the Merz' party can keep the AfD in check. But this will probably require a few more upright democrats. (MT)

Joachim Wagner (2025): *Stresstest AfD: Wehrhafte Demokratie und Rechtsextremismus* [Stress test AfD: Defensive democracy and right-wing extremism]. Berlin: Berliner Wissenschaftsverlag, 256 pages, 29 euros.

Joachim Wagner is still known today as the head of the political TV magazine *Panorama*, the ARD studio in London, and as the presenter of the TV program *Report from Berlin*. Before his journalistic career, Wagner, who holds a doctorate in law, was a scientific advisor in the Federal Chancellery, among other things. For his latest publication, Wagner read and evaluated more than 150 verdicts on proceedings by the right-wing party AfD »in full text« (p. 13) and conducted interviews with political actors. His central finding: »In the history of the Federal Republic, there has never been a party that has filed lawsuits as frequently and purposefully as the AfD« (p. 35).

For example, the AfD is suing the Office for the Protection of the Constitution for monitoring it and assessing it as »partly right-wing extremist.« It is also attempting to use legal means to compensate for parliamentary defeats, such as its failed attempt to appoint a vice president of the Bundestag or take over committee chairs.

In doing so, the party deliberately uses the courts as a stage for its political propaganda: »All AfD lawsuits have political roots, and every success in court is also a political one [...] which the party can celebrate as the supposed savior and guardian of the constitutional state.« (p. 35) The already overburdened judiciary is in a dilemma: it must reconcile the protection of democracy with the party's political freedoms.

Wagner asks whether, how, and, above all, how long this will work. He draws striking parallels with the observation of the party »Die Republikaner« by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, compares the AfD's litigation behavior with that of other political parties in terms of quantity and quality, and refers to previous bans on parties and associations. He also discusses current attempts at exclusion, from isolation at the local political level to civil society ostracism to the exclusion of AfD members of parliament from the FC Bundestag soccer team.

Despite numerous encouraging indications, which Wagner interprets as evidence of a resilient democracy, the lawyer and journalist comes to a less than optimistic conclusion and outlook after two hundred pages: the political struggle of the centrist parties against the AfD has largely failed, the ability of the judiciary to function has been severely impaired by the AfD's series of lawsuits, and the other parties have so far failed to find a solution to the AfD's most successful topic, irregular immigration. Wagner's book is nevertheless, or precisely because of this, important because it details how the right wing is occupying the law. (*Bro*)

Rebekka Endler (2025) *Witches, Bitches, IT-Girls. Wie patriarchale Mythen uns bis heute prägen* [Witches, bitches, IT girls: How patriarchal myths continue to shape us today]. Berlin: Rowohlt, 464 pages, 25 euros.

Rebekka Endler made a name for herself internationally with her first book, *Das Patriarchat der Dinge. Warum die Welt Frauen nicht passt* [The Patriarchy of Things: Why the World Doesn't Suit Women], published in 2021. In her new nonfiction book, the journalist and podcaster researches in nine chapters – that are sometimes ironically lighthearted, sometimes bitterly serious – the myths that blame women for everything. Endler starts with the texts of ancient mythology written and translated by men: Pandora opens the box, its contents escape, and »Pandora, the stupid bitch, is to blame for all the evils of this world.« (p. 10). The myths and stories in which women appeared either as specters, femmes or filles fatales, and usually ended up as victims, showed women and girls how they should *not* be. The decisive factor here is social norms that are men-dominated. »Patriarchy is not – as many would have us believe – a thing of the past; it lives on in all of us and continues to shape our perceptions to this day.« (p. 11) This means that women have also internalized and reproduced gender stereotypes, according to Endler's (self-)critical assessment. In addition, during the four years it took to write her book, »the situation has dramatically worsened« and there are an alarming number of current examples of women being blamed. But despite the numerous findings on the persistence of patriarchal structures and

the ever-present »same toxic ingredients« in the misogynistic brew, such as »biological understanding of gender, racist claims to superiority [...] and nostalgia for a past that never existed,« Endler does not despair, but returns to Pandora's box at the end of her book. As is well known, it contained not only all the evils of the world, but also hope – although Friedrich Nietzsche saw hope as the greatest evil of all. (*Bro*)

Hans-Dieter Schütt, Gregor Gysi (2025): *Auf eine Currywurst mit Gregor Gysi* [Eating currywurst with Gregor Gysi]. Berlin: Aufbau, 22 euros.

If Markus Söder engages in »fetishistic sausage eating« on Instagram and Robert Habeck is not the only one who has recognized that eating is political, how should Gregor Gysi's invitation to a currywurst be interpreted? Journalist Hans-Dieter Schütt, who often accompanies Gysi on book tours, accepted the invitation and explained: »Currywurst stands for: five-minute dialogue; for responsiveness that doesn't weigh every word; for an appetite for snacks; for philosophies that can be summed up on a napkin, so to speak. An offer for those in a hurry.« (p. 12) And so the left-wing elder statesman Gysi and Schütt, who in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was editor-in-chief of the FDJ newspaper *Junge Welt* from 1984 to 1989 and then arts editor of *Neues Deutschland*, talk about God and the world. Yes, really, about God. Gysi says: »Important in every church: the heretics. And: »I don't believe in God, but I fear a godless society.« (p. 49) The two also chat nicely about money, women, smoking weed, Marx and Engels, soccer, anti-Semitism, basic income, jokes, and visions. It's all very insightful and highly entertaining, because Schütt, who has written clever interview books and portraits of Frank Castorf, Stephan Hermlin, Klaus Lederer, Klaus Löwitsch, Friedrich Schorlemmer, and Regine Hildebrandt, among others, asks the right questions at the right moment. For example, what vision has Gysi said goodbye to? His answer: »A world without wars.« (*MT*)

Norbert F. Pötzl (2025): *Das Schattenreich des Alexander Schalck-Golodkowski – Vom Entstehen und Verschwinden der DDR-Milliarden* [The shadow realm of Alexander Schalck-Golodkowski – The emergence and disappearance of the GDR billions]. Munich: Europaverlag, 288 pages, 25 euros.

Norbert F. Pötzl, editor at *Der Spiegel* from 1972 to 2013, has made a name for himself as a meticulous and objective, but also gripping author. He has written books about Uwe Barschel, Erich Honecker, and the *Treuhand complex*. In his new book, he takes us into the »shadow realm« of (Dr. iur.) Schalck, as Alexander

Schalck-Golodkowski was usually known in the GDR. As head of the state-owned KoKo (Commercial Coordination), a group of companies managed by the intelligence service and subordinate to the Ministry for State Security and the Central Committee of the SED, he generated billions in foreign currency outside of official foreign trade. Schalck supplied the party elite with Western luxury goods that could not be manufactured in the GDR. And he himself also profited from these dubious deals, which operated successfully according to the motto »there is no rule for dealing with foreign currency shortages.« He led a Western lifestyle in the East that was unimaginable for the average citizen of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The latter proved to be his undoing when the GDR collapsed, because, according to the last chairman of the GDR Council of Ministers, Hans Modrow: »Of course, we also need someone to take primary responsibility for the misery [...] We need someone to blame, someone the people can say lived at our expense [...] That person is Alexander Schalck-Golodkowski.« (p. 41f.)

Pötzl traces in detail the rise and fall of a cool-headed foreign currency procurer who ultimately stabilized the system. He does not let the story end with the fall of the Berlin Wall, but goes on to recount the second life of the »refugee« Schalck at Lake Tegernsee, financed by business friends and marked by countless interrogations by the BND (German Federal Intelligence Service), which, on instructions from the very top, were largely not allowed to be recorded.

The book reads like true crime, but does not fall into *Ostalgie*. Pötzl proves that a significant portion of the foreign currency was generated through forced labor by prisoners, selling stolen art and antiques, and illegal arms deals. And the author does not fall into the trap of trivializing Schalck, who died in 2015, as a victim of the times or political circumstances. A single sentence in the epilogue suffices: »Schalck's grave is only about 50 meters away from that of Peter Fechter« (p. 276), whose agonizing death at the Berlin Wall in 1962 shocked the world. (*Bro*)

Eren Güvercin (2025): *DITIB und der ferngesteuerte Islam in Deutschland. Warum wir eine religionspolitische Zeitenwende brauchen* [DITIB and remote-controlled Islam in Germany. Why we need a turning point in religious politics]. Munich: C.H. Beck, 18 euros.

The author and critic of organized Islam in Germany describes himself as a »German Muslim.« Güvercin begins by describing how much this self-designation irritates him and how he finds himself caught between two chairs as a journalist who not only writes about religion and Recep Tayyip Erdogan's politics for various media outlets, but is also a participant in the German Islam Conference, a founding member of PEN Berlin, and the founder of the German-Muslim

Alhambra Society. In 2012, Güvercin wrote »Neo-Moslems,« a worthwhile »portrait of a generation.« In his new book, he addresses the problem that Islamic associations and organizations such as DITIB are closely intertwined with the governments of Turkey and Iran in terms of personnel and structure, and that they spread an image of Islam that does not do justice to the reality of life for the 5.6 million Muslims living in Germany. Güvercin speaks openly about what is going wrong and calls for, first, a reorientation of the German Islam Conference, second, a European strategy against Turkish influence, and third, a long-term strategy against Islamism. The committed journalist and profound expert on political Islam in Germany appeals to the government and all of us: »The purpose of religious policy is religious freedom.« (MT)

Nina Schedlmayer (2025): *Hitlers queere Künstlerin. Stephanie Hollenstein – Malerin und Soldat* [Hitler's queer artist. Stephanie Hollenstein – painter and soldier]. Vienna: Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 301 pages, 28 euros.

It is well known that National Socialism met with broad approval. But when an avowed lesbian becomes enthusiastic about Hitler, joins the NSDAP, and writes anti-Semitic texts, it causes astonishment. Even more so when the background story goes like this: a woman from a farming background, born in 1886 in Vorarlberg (Austria), joins the First World War disguised as a man, is discovered, becomes a war painter at the front, attends art school in Munich, lives openly as a homosexual, earns her living with expressionist painting, and is a co-founder of a feminist artists' group. Nevertheless, Hollenstein is not exactly a feminist *role model*, according to historian and cultural journalist Nina Schedlmayer, who has written an insightful book about the seemingly contradictory artist, enriched with a wealth of background information. Chapter headings such as »Gender Fluidity and Patriotism: Soldier Stephan Hollenstein,« »Network of War Criminals,« and »Eliminating Harmful Elements: Nazi Cultural Policy« pique the reader's interest in learning more about the painter, who was queer in every sense of the word, and her work. Some of her works are reproduced in the book. The cover of the carefully designed book shows the portrait of a soldier – a self-portrait of Hollenstein? (MT)

Reviews

Hachmeister, Lutz (2024): *Hitlers Interviews. Der Diktator und die Journalisten* [Hitler's interviews. The dictator and the journalists]. Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 379 pages, EUR 28

Reviewed by Martina Thiele

The sudden and much too early death of communication researcher, publicist, documentary filmmaker and media critic Lutz Hachmeister in 2024 not only shocked those who knew him personally. Many obituaries stated that »we«, German society, urgently needed critical scholars like him »especially in these times«. Especially, I would like to add, as his analyses of the present were always based on a profound knowledge of history. This is also evident in his last book, which was published shortly after his death in the fall of 2024. *Hitler's Interviews: The Dictator and the Journalists* offers a comprehensive analysis of the more than 100 interviews that Adolf Hitler gave to foreign journalists and a few women journalists¹ between 1922 and 1944.

Lutz Hachmeister examines how Hitler and his aides in the Foreign and Propaganda Ministries strategically used these interviews to spread National Socialist ideology, but also for day-to-day political purposes. US, British, Italian and French journalists in particular had the chance to talk to Hitler if they submitted their questions in advance. After the interview, the text had to be submitted again and approved. For journalists, an interview with Hitler was a scoop due to the worldwide interest in the political situation in Germany. However, Hitler was not an easy interviewee. As Hearst journalist Karl von Wiegand noted: »I didn't get anything out of him. If you ask him a question, he makes a speech. This whole visit with him was a waste of time.« (p. 11) Nevertheless, Wiegand

1 The »List of Interviews« (from p. 337) shows that Annetta Halliday-Antona, *Detroit News*; Dorothy Thompson, *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*; Anne O'Hare McCormick, *The New York Times*; Élisabeth Sauvy, *Paris Soir*; Inga Arvad, *Belingske Aftenavis* interviewed Hitler. Hachmeister is pleased to highlight Sigrid Schultz, a journalist who did not interview Hitler, but who knew him personally as head of the *Chicago Tribune's* Berlin bureau. Schultz was committed and courageous in representing the interests of foreign reporters against the Nazi censors. She refused an exclusive interview with Hitler, among other things, because »10 cents per Hitler word were demanded« (see p. 101).

conducted further interviews with Hitler afterwards, and Sefton Welmer from the London *Daily Express* and Louis P. Lochner from the *Associated Press* news agency also interviewed Hitler several times. Hitler hardly gave any interviews to German newspapers, either before 1933 or afterwards. Of course, after The Nazis came to power, the domestic press, which had been brought into line, regularly reported on the great interest »abroad« in National Socialist Germany and referred to the interviews with the »Führer«.

Lutz Hachmeister begins with a prologue in which he explains how Hitler talked his way to power. His »non-stop suada, his persistent monologuing in all kinds of communication situations« was also evident in the interviews – which are actually a dialogical form. Hachmeister divides them into three phases: early interviews, which lasted until the arrest of the »Bavarian Mussolini« after the 1923 coup attempt and his imprisonment in Landsberg; then the rise to power between 1930 and 1933, when the National Socialists gained ground in elections, and finally the phase of dictatorial power between 1933 and 1945, when Hitler was head of state and commander-in-chief of the Wehrmacht. In this prologue, Hachmeister discusses in detail the many Hitler biographies, which ultimately offer little that is new. He points out the analytical limitations of skewed »Weimar reloaded analogies«, deals with the meaning and purpose of the journalistic genre of interviews, and addresses the current debate about interviewees as »useful idiots« who offer right-wing extremists a platform for self-promotion. The author returns to these questions in the epilogue, but already teases: »Interviews with dictators and autocrats make little sense.« (p. 39)

In the following chapter, Hachmeister focuses »the apparatus«, Hitler's helpers who organized the interviews. It is entitled »Putzi and Charlie«. This refers to Franz Sedgwick Hanfstaengl, the first »foreign press officer of the NSDAP« and newspaper researcher Prof. Dr. Karl Böhmer, both from middle-class families, with contacts in the US, sophisticated and well-connected. Hachmeister describes in a knowledgeable and thoroughly entertaining way how successful their Nazi careers were, then ended abruptly and, in Böhmer's case, fatally due to his talkativeness while drunk. The rivalry between the Nazi public relations officers in the Foreign Office and those in the Ministry of Propaganda, who obstructed and denounced each other, becomes clear. Hachmeister also refers to those who were able to continue their careers in West Germany after 1945 without being bothered.

In the following chapters, the author focuses on the US, French and British interviews. He then turns to the interviews with »Axis journalists« and »neutrals«, because Italian and Japanese journalists in particular were also eager stenotypists and, like Dottore Leo Negrelli, convinced fascists. In a conversation with him in 1923, Hitler rambled on about »the struggle of the Jewish-Marxist principle against the principle of nationalities« (p. 207). Negrelli became

Hermann Göring's liaison in Italy and in 1926 editor-in-chief of the German-language *Alpenzeitung* in Bolzano, which promoted the fascization of South Tyrol through its journalism.

The wealth of meticulously documented detailed information on individual persons, their networks, and careers, and the easily readable presentation of this diverse information set Hachmeister's study apart from the mass of books on the Nazi state, Hitler, and his vassals. Hachmeister is too familiar with the historical controversies between »intentionalists« and »structuralists« to take sides. Why should he, when only a holistic view promises new insights? In the chapter »Faking Hitler«, the author focuses on interviews with Hitler that are very likely fabricated and casts doubt on the authenticity of the interviews conducted by Catalan journalists Josep Pla and Eugeni Xammar in 1923.

The book concludes with a chapter on the Hitler interview conducted by US diplomat John Cudahy in 1941, which contemporaries such as the US Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Lickes criticized in the *New York Times* as a complete failure. Lickes describes the interviewer John Cudahy, »our former ambassador to Belgium«, as a »simple fellow« who unfortunately allowed Hitler to cloud his mind (p. 259).

For their meticulous analysis of the conversations with Hitler, Hachmeister and his team, whom he expressly thanks, were unable to draw on audio recordings or original manuscripts, only on the interviews published in the press. What was actually asked and answered is therefore not documented. Nor is it possible to determine what changes had to be made before the interview was accepted. Unfortunately, there are no reproductions of the interviews. At least a press clipping would have been informative, and not just for media scholars. However, there are some photos in the volume as well as an extensive index of names, numerous notes and cross-references and at least the chronologically ordered list of interviews in the appendix.

In the epilogue, Hachmeister takes up the introductory question »How do you interview a dictator – and why at all?« and speaks of »Hitler as a cipher for journalism research«, because »these questions apply to all dictators and autocrats.« (p. 281) Hachmeister offers a topical all-round review and does not hold back with assessments of more or less successful interviews that journalists have conducted with Vladimir Putin, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Fidel Castro, Deng Xiaoping, Henry Kissinger and many more. Those who are less interested in detailed historical knowledge than in the current dos and don'ts of the revived »dictator interview« genre will prefer this epilogue to the middle section of the book. However, those who lean toward a genealogical understanding of history must read the entire book as an incredibly rich archive and legacy – and praise it.

About the reviewer

Martina Thiele, Dr. disc. pol., is Professor of Media Studies at the University of Tübingen. Her research and teaching focuses on digitalization and social responsibility, media and public sphere theories, gender media studies, and stereotype and prejudice research. She is one of the editors of *Journalism Research*. Contact: martina.thiele@uni-tuebingen.de

Ingrid Brodnig, Florian Klenk, Gabi Waldner, Armin Wolf (eds.) (2024): *Praktischer Journalismus. Ein Lehrbuch für den Berufseinstieg und alle, die wissen wollen, wie Medien arbeiten.* [Practical journalism. A textbook for career starters and anyone who wants to know how the media work.] Vienna: Falter Verlag 2024, 264 pages, EUR 29.90

Reviewed by Gabriele Hooffacker

Sometimes you just have to break the mold. The Austrian textbook *Practical journalism* does so by moving beyond its great role model and forebear by Heinz Pürer to compile and curate a completely new work, according to its editors.

Starting with the structure of the book, their new concept is self-evident: Beginning with the basics (what is journalism – and what isn't), the textbook covers the classic beats (from foreign policy to local news to science), news genres (from news to editorial work), »digital journalism« (from social media to podcasts to artificial intelligence) and journalism as a profession (ethics, media law, labor law, journalistic entrepreneurship).

Perhaps it is precisely because of this break with tradition that Andreas Koller, deputy editor-in-chief of the Austrian daily paper *Salzburger Nachrichten*, first takes readers back to 1983 before outlining the changes and challenges facing (local) journalism today. A compact excursion into the history of journalism (Armin Thurnherr) is followed by an overview of sources and news factors (Alexandra Förderl-Schmidt). What distinguishes this anthology is that Andreas Koller invokes and expands the gatekeeper function of journalism (p. 15), while Alexandra Förderl-Schmidt questions it (p. 27) – accurately reflecting the current fractures and contradictions in journalism.

Overview articles on the various beats, shaped by the perspectives of the respective authors, are followed by a chapter on journalistic genres. Some of these are genuine »how-to« articles that are useful reading for those starting out in the profession. Yet, whether »satire« is a genre or rather a stylistic device is a matter up for debate.

The decision not to separate journalistic genres by media channel leads to duplication, but still makes sense: a written portrait (Christa Zöchling) brings different challenges than an audio portrait (Eva Rother). In the chapter on written interviews it is suggested that they are still transcribed by hand (Renate Graber) – with no mention of speech-to-text tools. In turn, such tools are offered by Christina Elmer in her contribution on AI in the next chapter.

The volume devotes a separate chapter to digital journalism, which wisely refers back to articles on journalistic genres. The section on online journalism (Gerold Riedmann) remains general, but practical tips are then provided in

the article on »Multimedia Presentation Formats« (Elisabeth Gamperl). The article on data journalism encourages readers to engage with numbers (Martin Thür / Jakob Weichenberger), while Ingrid Brodnig describes the challenges of fact-checking, after briefly introducing the topic of online research for image and video forensics earlier in the book.

The chapter »Journalism as a profession« begins with an insightful contribution on editorial management (Martin Kotynek) and then moves on to journalistic ethics (Wolfgang Wagner) and legal issues (Maria Windhager) as well as labor law (Andreas Schmidt/Verena Weilharter) and personal branding for journalists (Richard Gutjahr). The volume concludes with two articles on career paths (Nikolaus Koller) and the media landscape in Austria (Harald Fidler).

The articles vary considerably in terms of tone and presentation. One author (Katharina Schell) provides few references but makes extensive use of footnotes, while another one (Armin Wolf) lists practically all relevant literature on the subject. And sometimes there are simply lists of links (Jonas Vogt) – these quickly become outdated and are impractical to type.

Due to the large number of authors, the tone of the volume varies. Sometimes a collective »we« is invoked when describing ideal behavior in journalism, while at other times the reader is addressed directly with an informal »you.« In the chapter on genres, however, the formal form of »you« in German is used throughout the text. Editorial guidelines in the form of a style book could be helpful here.

On multiple occasions, whether in the first chapter on investigative journalism or on the topic of domestic politics, the influence of PR activities by political parties and companies is clearly illustrated and the need for smart counter-research by experts emphasized. By and by, these mosaic pieces form the picture of an Austrian media landscape with powerful media outlets on the political right, making the case for a country in dire need of good journalism.

When holding the book up against its title and claim (»A textbook for career starters and anyone who wants to know how the media work«), it can be concluded:

- »a textbook«: sometimes presented as a narrative, sometimes as practical advice
- »for career starters«: sometimes offering fundamental insights, sometimes individual reflections
- »for anyone who wants to know how the media [in Austria] work«: a resounding yes – what a great read!

About the reviewer

Gabriele Hooffacker is co-editor of *Journalism Research* and teaches at Leipzig University of Applied Sciences (HTWK Leipzig). Hooffacker edits the textbook series »Journalistische Praxis«, founded by Walther von La Roche (1936-2010) and published by Springer vs. Contact: g.hooffacker@link-m.de

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Henrik Müller (2023): *Challenging Economic Journalism*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 304 pages, EUR 139.09

Reviewed by Tanjev Schultz

As important as business journalism is, it receives little attention in academia. At least compared to political reporting, it's striking that journalism research doesn't pay much attention to the business section. The situation is similar in education and textbooks. There are, however, a few notable exceptions. One is the degree program in economic journalism at the TU Dortmund University, led by Henrik Müller, former deputy editor-in-chief of *manager magazin* and now professor of economic journalism. In a recent English-language book, Müller formulates standards for business journalism and explores the specific challenges facing this field.

The book links central research questions and key study findings directly to journalistic practice – an exemplary bridge between journalism and journalism studies, one that Müller himself personifies. Complex topics are presented in an accessible manner, while pressing questions are raised and answered: What role should business journalism assume? Which »narratives« dominate reporting, and which issues are systematically overlooked by the media?

Müller outlines the history of business journalism, presents a helpful taxonomy, and discusses quality criteria. His standards are rightly high and meeting them is certainly not easy: »We are dealing with particularly complex and abstract issues. The key-audience of professional users demands relevant issues to be covered not just in a factually correct, but also in a forward-looking manner. Economic journalism is confronted with a wide range of powerful interests that try to influence the media in their favour.« (p. 57)

Müller, who still works as a business journalist and contributes as a columnist to *Der Spiegel's* online edition, writes about editorial practices with critical distance, though never in a detached manner. Several chapters open with concise accounts of his own professional experiences. One such episode recalls a meeting at the Bundesbank (Germany's central bank), where Müller was struck by how strongly some colleagues identified with the very subjects they were covering: »[J]ournalists should lean against the wind by challenging popular economic narratives« (p. 106).

The author proposes a normative model for economic journalism, encapsulated in the so-called ESSF formula: efficiency, stability, sustainability, and fairness (p. 64). According to Müller, whenever the formula – or any of its four dimensions – is disregarded or violated in economic practice, this should trigger critical journalistic scrutiny. Efficiency requires that economic resources not be

wasted; as he puts it, »the more income and growth the better, all things being equal« (p. 64). The additional criteria, however, ensure that the model is neither naïve nor reducible to a radically neoliberal program: »Stability entails the absence of erratic movements of markets that obstruct their smooth functioning and may lead to economic and social disruptions. Sustainability purports that the destructive overuse of natural resources is undesirable, as it leads to future scarcities. Fairness rules out exploitation and overreach of any kind resulting from the asymmetric distribution of wealth, power, or information.« (p. 64)

Müller could have elaborated more extensively on how his formula relates to different schools of economic thought, and on how media organizations – whose editorial orientations are often aligned with one of these schools – might avoid or at least mitigate ideological bias. Maybe the book could also have addressed in more detail the ethical pitfalls and various codes that exist in business journalism more fully, even if these often only require what should be self-evident (such as avoiding conflicts of interest or refraining from using insider information for one's own business).

Anyone who takes the ESSF formula seriously will quickly notice shortcomings in the media – just as Müller does when he criticizes, among other things, the lack of adequate reporting on international issues. Too often, global developments are either overlooked or reframed for a purely national audience. Müller himself notes that whenever he writes about the European Union in his *Spiegel* column, the numbers – clicks, reach, and so on – consistently fall short compared to his other articles.

Drawing readers' attention to economic topics is no easy task.

The book discusses the role of storytelling and the importance of crafting journalistic pieces that resonate with the widest possible audience – ideally without sacrificing too much substance. However, it is not a guidebook that explains exactly how a piece should be written or filmed. Precisely because it takes a deeper approach and presents more fundamental arguments, it would be desirable for not only researchers and students, but also experienced journalists to read and be inspired by this book.

About the reviewer

Dr. Tanjev Schultz is a Professor of Journalism at Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz, Germany. He is one of the editors of *Journalism Research*. Contact: tanjev.schultz@uni-mainz.de

Kommunikationswissenschaft



HANS POERSCHKE

Das Prinzip der Parteiliteratur. Partei und Presse bei und unter Lenin 1899 - 1924

2020, 240 S., Broschur, 213 x 142 mm, dt.

ISBN (Print) 978-3-86962-565-2 | 26,00 EUR

ISBN (PDF) 978-3-86962-566-9 | 22,99 EUR

ISBN (ePub) 978-3-86962-568-3 | 22,99 EUR

Es ist eine Tatsache, dass die Presse im Staatssozialismus von der jeweils herrschenden Partei kontrolliert wird. Oft wird behauptet, diese Einschränkungen der Pressefreiheit seien darauf zurückzuführen, dass Lenins Ideen von den sozialistischen Führern fehlinterpretiert worden seien. Der vorliegende Band widerlegt dies. Eine genaue Betrachtung von Lenins Schriften zeigt, dass die strikte Kontrolle der Presse bereits im 1905 ausformulierten Prinzip der ›Parteiliteratur‹ angelegt ist.

Davon zeugen die unter Lenin geschaffenen Tatsachen – von der Zerstörung demokratischer Öffentlichkeit in Russland durch rigorose Unterdrückung Andersdenkender bis zum Verbot der gesamten Presse. Aus dem so geschaffenen System konnte wenige Jahre später der Stalinismus erwachsen.



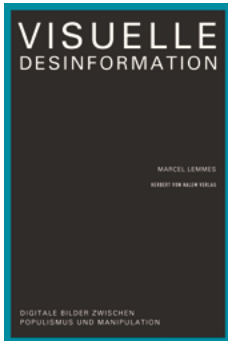
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Medienwissenschaft



MARCEL LEMMES

Visuelle Desinformation. Digitale Bilder zwischen Populismus und Manipulation

2025, 368 S., 17 Abb., Broschur, 213 x 142 mm, dt.

ISBN (Print) 978-3-86962-741-0 | 34,00 EUR

ISBN (PDF) 978-3-86962-742-7 | 28,99 EUR

Populistische Akteur:innen nutzen die Macht digitaler Bilder gezielt für Desinformation und emotionale Mobilisierung. Doch wie genau funktionieren diese visuellen Strategien?

Das Buch schließt eine entscheidende Forschungslücke, indem es die visuellen Komponenten populistischer Kommunikation analysiert. Dafür entwickelt die Arbeit zwei innovative Bausteine: einen präzisen, auf Manipulation statt Täuschung basierenden Desinformationsbegriff und eine aktuelle bildpragmatische Theorie des populistischen Bildes. Das Ergebnis ist ein scharfes Analyseraster, das die Mechanismen visueller Manipulation systematisch erfasst und verständlich macht.



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Kommunikationswissenschaft



JANA RICK

**Ausstieg aus dem Journalismus.
Gründe, Wege und Folgen**

2025, 388 S., 9 Abb., 23 Tab.,
Broschur, 213 x 142 mm, dt.

ISBN (Print) 978-3-86962-707-6 | 42,00 EUR

ISBN (PDF) 978-3-86962-708-3 | 35,99 EUR

Aus welchen Gründen verlassen Journalist:innen ihren Beruf, in welche Berufsfelder zieht es sie und welche Folgen hat die berufliche Entscheidung für die Aussteiger:innen? Vor dem Hintergrund der strukturellen Krise des Journalismus nimmt die Studie erstmalig systematisch ehemalige Journalist:innen in den Blick.

Die Ergebnisse der Mixed-Methods-Untersuchung machen deutlich, dass der Wandel des Journalismus und die veränderten Arbeitsbedingungen treibende Faktoren für die Berufswechsel von Journalist:innen sind. Nicht immer wird der Berufswechsel dabei als freiwillig wahrgenommen. Journalist:innen profitieren häufig beruflich und privat vom Ausstieg, die Berufswechsel können jedoch auch mit einer Identitätskrise und einer ambivalenten Zufriedenheit einhergehen. Viele Journalist:innen geben ihren Traumberuf für bessere Arbeitsbedingungen auf.



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Hegemonie und politische
Kommunikation in vernetzten
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